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crave



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For My Boys,
Who Have Always Believed in Me
and
For Stephanie,
Who Helped Me Believe in Myself Again.*

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If You're Not Living on the Edge, You're Taking Up Too Much Space

I stand at the outer tarmac door staring at the plane I am about to get on and try my hardest not to freak out.

It's easier said than done.

Not just because I'm about to leave behind everything I know, though up until two minutes ago, that *was* my main concern. Now, though, as I stare at this plane that I'm not even sure deserves the dignity of being called a plane, a whole new level of panic is setting in.

"So, Grace." The man my uncle Finn sent to pick me up looks down at me with a patient smile. Philip, I think he said his name was, but I can't be sure. It's hard to hear him over the wild beating of my heart. "Are you ready for an adventure?"

No. No, I am *not* the least bit ready—for an adventure or anything else that's about to come my way.

If you had told me a month ago that I would be standing on the outskirts of an airport in Fairbanks, Alaska, I would've said that you were misinformed. And if you had told me that the whole reason I was in Fairbanks was to catch the tiniest puddle jumper in existence to what feels like the very edge of the world—or, in this case, a town on the edge of Denali, the

highest mountain in North America—I would have said that you were high as a freaking kite.

But a lot can change in thirty days. And even more can get ripped away.

In fact, the only thing I *have* been able to count on these past few weeks is that no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse...

Landing Is Just Throwing Yourself at the Ground and Hoping You Don't Miss

“**T**here she is,” Philip says as we clear the peaks of several mountains, taking one hand off the steering column to point to a small collection of buildings in the distance. “Healy, Alaska. Home sweet home.”

“Oh, wow. It looks...” Tiny. It looks really, really tiny. Way smaller than just my neighborhood in San Diego, let alone the whole city.

Then again, it's pretty hard to see much of anything from up here. Not because of the mountains that loom over the area like long-forgotten monsters but because we're in the middle of a weird kind of haze that Philip refers to as “civil twilight” even though it's barely five o'clock. Still, I can see well enough to make out that the so-called town he's pointing at is full of mismatched buildings randomly grouped together.

I finally settle on, “Interesting. It looks...interesting.”

It's not the first description that popped into my head—no, that was the old cliché that hell has actually frozen over—but it is the most polite one as Philip drops even lower, preparing for what I'm pretty sure will be yet another harrowing incident in the list of harrowing incidents that have plagued me since I got

on the first of three planes ten hours ago.

Sure enough, I've only just spotted what passes for an airport in this one-thousand-person town (thank you, Google) when Philip says, "Hang on, Grace. It's a short runway because it's hard to keep a long one clear of snow or ice for any amount of time out here. It's going to be a quick landing."

I have no idea what a "quick landing" means, but it doesn't sound good. So I grab the bar on the plane door, which I'm pretty sure exists for just this very reason, and hold on tight as we drop lower and lower.

"Okay, kid. Here goes nothing!" Philip tells me. Which, by the way, definitely makes the top five things you don't *ever* want to hear your pilot say while you're still in the air.

The ground looms white and unyielding below us, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Seconds later, I feel the wheels skip across the ground. Then Philip hits the brakes hard enough to slam me forward so fast that my seat belt is the only thing keeping my head from meeting the control panel. The plane whines—not sure what part of it is making that horrendous noise or if it's a collective death knell—so I choose not to focus on it.

Especially when we start skidding to the left.

I bite my lip, keep my eyes squeezed firmly shut even as my heart threatens to burst out of my chest. If this is the end, I don't need to see it coming.

The thought distracts me, has me wondering just what my mom and dad might have seen coming, and by the time I shut down that line of thinking, Philip has the plane sliding to a shaky, shuddering halt.

I know exactly how it feels. Right now, even my toes are trembling.

I peel my eyes open slowly, resisting the urge to pat myself

down to make sure I really am still in one piece. But Philip just laughs and says, “Textbook landing.”

Maybe if that textbook is a horror novel. One he’s reading upside down and backward.

I don’t say anything, though. Just give him the best smile I can manage and grab my backpack from under my feet. I pull out the pair of gloves Uncle Finn sent me and put them on. Then I push open the plane door and jump down, praying the whole time that my knees will support me when I hit the ground.

They do, just barely.

After taking a few seconds to make sure I’m not going to crumble—and to pull my brand-new coat more tightly around me because it’s literally about eight degrees out here—I head to the back of the plane to get the three suitcases that are all that is left of my life.

I feel a pang looking at them, but I don’t let myself dwell on everything I had to leave behind, any more than I let myself dwell on the idea of strangers living in the house I grew up in. After all, who cares about a house or art supplies or a drum kit when I’ve lost so much more?

Instead, I grab a bag out of what passes for the tiny airplane’s cargo hold and wrestle it to the ground. Before I can reach for the second, Philip is there, lifting my other two suitcases like they’re lled with pillows instead of everything I own in the world.

“Come on, Grace. Let’s go before you start to turn blue out here.” He nods toward a parking lot—not even a *building*, just a parking lot—about two hundred yards away, and I want to groan. It’s so cold out that now I’m shaking for a whole different reason. How can anyone live like this? It’s unreal, especially considering it was seventy degrees where I woke up this morning.

There’s nothing to do but nod, though, so I do. Then grab onto the handle of my suitcase and start dragging it toward a

small patch of concrete that I'm pretty sure passes for an airport in Healy. It's a far cry from San Diego's bustling terminals.

Philip overtakes me easily, a large suitcase dangling from each hand. I start to tell him that he can pull the handles out and roll them, but the second I step off the runway and onto the snowy ground that surrounds it in all directions, I figure out why he's carrying them—it's pretty much impossible to roll a heavy suitcase over snow.

I'm near frozen by the time we make it halfway to the (thankfully still plowed) parking lot, despite my heavy jacket and synthetic fur-lined gloves. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do from here, how I'm supposed to get to the boarding school my uncle is headmaster of, so I turn to ask Philip if Uber is even a thing up here. But before I can get a word out, someone steps from behind one of the pickup trucks in the lot and rushes straight toward me.

I think it's my cousin, Macy, but it's hard to tell, considering she's covered from head to toe in protective weather gear.

"You're here!" the moving pile of hats, scarves, and jackets says, and I was right—it's definitely Macy.

"I'm here," I agree dryly, wondering if it's too late to reconsider foster care. Or emancipation. Any living situation in San Diego has got to be better than living in a town whose airport consists of one runway and a tiny parking lot. Heather is going to die when I text her.

"Finally!" Macy says, reaching out for a hug. It's a little awkward, partly because of all the clothes she's wearing and partly because—despite being a year younger than my own seventeen years—she's about eight inches taller than I am. "I've been waiting for more than an hour."

I hug her back but let go quickly as I answer. "Sorry, my plane was late from Seattle. The storm there made it hard to take off."

“Yeah, we hear that a lot,” she tells me with a grimace. “Pretty sure their weather is even worse than ours.”

I want to argue—miles of snow and enough protective gear to give astronauts pause seem pretty freaking awful to me. But I don’t know Macy all that well, despite the fact that we’re cousins, and the last thing I want to do is offend her. Besides Uncle Finn and now Philip, she is the only other person I know in this place.

Not to mention the only family I have left.

Which is why, in the end, I just shrug.

It must be a good enough answer, though, because she grins back at me before turning to Philip, who is still carrying my suitcases. “Thanks so much for picking her up, Uncle Philip. Dad says to tell you he owes you a case of beer.”

“No worries, Mace. Had to run a few errands in Fairbanks anyway.” He says it so casually, like hopping in a plane for a couple-hundred-mile round-trip journey is no big deal. Then again, out here where there’s nothing but mountains and snow in all directions, maybe it’s not. After all, according to Wikipedia, Healy has only one major road in and out of it, and in the winter sometimes even that gets closed down.

I’ve spent the last month trying to imagine what that looks like. What it *is* like.

I guess I’m about to find out.

“Still, he says he’ll be around Friday with that beer so you guys can watch the game in true bro-mance style.” She turns to me. “My dad’s really upset he couldn’t make it out to pick you up, Grace. There was an emergency at the school that no one else could deal with. But he told me to get him the second we make it back.”

“No worries,” I tell her. Because what else am I supposed to say? Besides, if I’ve learned anything in the month since my parents died, it’s just how little most things matter.

Who cares who picks me up as long as I get to the school?

Who cares where I live if it's not going to be with my mom and dad?

Philip walks us to the edge of the cleared parking lot before nally letting go of my suitcases. Macy gives him a quick hug goodbye, and I shake his hand, murmur, "Thanks for coming to get me."

"Not a problem at all. Any time you need a ight, I'm your man." He winks, then heads back to the tarmac to deal with his plane.

We watch him go for a couple of seconds before Macy grabs the handles on both suitcases and starts rolling them across the tiny parking lot. She gestures for me to do the same with the one I'm holding on to, so I do, even though a part of me wants nothing more than to run back onto the tarmac with Philip, climb back into that tiny plane, and demand to be own back to Fairbanks. Or, even better, back home to San Diego.

It's a feeling that only gets worse when Macy says, "Do you need to pee? It's a good ninety-minute ride to the school from here."

Ninety minutes? That doesn't seem possible when the whole town looks like we could drive it in fteen, maybe twenty minutes at the most. Then again, when we were ying over, I didn't see any building remotely big enough to be a boarding school for close to four hundred teenagers, so maybe the school isn't actually in Healy.

I can't help but think of the mountains and rivers that surround this town in all directions and wonder where on earth I'm going to end up before this day is through. And where exactly she expects me to pee out here anyway.

"I'm okay," I answer after a minute, even as my stomach somersaults and pitches nervously.

This whole day has been about getting here, and that was bad

enough. But as we roll my suitcases through the semi-darkness, the well-below-freezing air slapping at me with each step we take, everything gets surreal, superfast. Especially when Macy walks through the entire parking lot to the *snowmobile* parked just beyond the edge of the pavement.

At first, I think she's joking around, but then she starts loading my suitcases onto the attached sled and it occurs to me that this is really happening. I'm really about to ride a snowmobile in the near dark through *Alaska* in weather that is more than *twenty degrees below freezing*, if the app on my phone can be believed.

All that's missing is the wicked witch cackling that she's going to get me and my little dog, too. Then again, at this point, that would probably be redundant.

I watch with a kind of horrified fascination as Macy straps my suitcases to the sled. I should probably offer to help, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. And since the last thing I want is for the few belongings I have left in the world to be strewn across the side of a mountain, I figure if there was ever a time to leave things to the experts, this is it.

"Here, you're going to need these," Macy tells me, opening up the small bag that was already strapped to the sled when we got out here. She rummages around for a second before pulling out a pair of heavy snow pants and a thick wool scarf. They are both hot pink, my favorite color when I was a kid but not so much now. Still, it's obvious Macy remembered that from the last time I saw her, and I can't help being touched as she holds them out to me.

"Thanks." I give her the closest thing to a smile I can manage.

After a few false starts, I manage to pull the pants on over the thermal underwear and fleece pajama pants with emojis on them (the only kind of fleece pants I own) that I put on at my uncle's instruction before boarding the plane in Seattle. Then I take a

long look at the way Macy's rainbow-colored scarf is wrapped around her neck and face and do the same thing with mine.

It's harder than it looks, especially trying to get it positioned well enough to keep it from sliding down my nose the second I move.

Eventually, I manage it, though, and that's when Macy reaches for one of the helmets draped over the snowmobile's handles.

"The helmet is insulated, so it will help keep you warm as well as protect your head in case of a crash," she instructs. "Plus, it's got a shield to protect your eyes from the cold air."

"My eyes can freeze?" I ask, more than a little traumatized, as I take the helmet from her and try to ignore how hard it is to breathe with the scarf over my nose.

"Eyes don't freeze," Macy answers with a little laugh, like she can't help herself. "But the shield will keep them from watering and make you more comfortable."

"Oh, right." I duck my head as my cheeks heat up. "I'm an idiot."

"No you're not." Macy wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes tight. "Alaska is a lot. Everyone who comes here has a learning curve. You'll figure it all out soon enough."

I'm not holding my breath on that one—I can't imagine that this cold, foreign place will ever feel familiar to me—but I don't say anything. Not when Macy has already done so much to try and make me feel welcome.

"I'm really sorry you had to come here, Grace," she continues after a second. "I mean, I'm really excited that you're here. I just wish it wasn't because..." Her voice drifts off before she finishes the sentence. But I'm used to that by now. After weeks of having my friends and teachers tiptoe around me, I've learned that no one wants to say the words.

Still, I'm too exhausted to fall in the blanks. Instead, I slip my head in the helmet and secure it the way Macy showed me.

"Ready?" she asks once I've got my face and head as protected as they're going to get.

The answer hasn't changed since Philip asked me that same question in Fairbanks. *Not even close*. "Yeah. Absolutely."

I wait for Macy to climb on the snowmobile before getting on behind her.

"Hold on to my waist!" she shouts as she turns it on, so I do. Seconds later, we're speeding into the darkness that stretches endlessly in front of us.

I've never been more terrified in my life.

2

Just Because You Live in a Tower Doesn't Make You a Prince

The ride isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I mean, it's not good, but that has more to do with the fact that I've been traveling all day and I just want to get someplace—anyplace—where I can stay longer than a layover. Or a really long snowmobile ride.

And if that place also happens to be warm and devoid of the local wildlife I can hear howling in the distance, then I'm all about it. Especially since everything south of my waist seems to have fallen asleep...

I'm in the middle of trying to figure out how to wake up my very numb butt when we suddenly veer off the trail (and I mean "trail" in the loosest sense of the word) we've been following and onto a kind of plateau on the side of the mountain. It's as we wind our way through yet another copse of trees that I finally see lights up ahead.

"Is that Katmere Academy?" I shout.

"Yeah." Macy lays off the speed a little, steering around trees like we're on a giant slalom course. "We should be there in about five minutes."

Thank God. Much longer out here and I might actually lose

a toe or three, even with my doubled-up wool socks. I mean, everyone knows Alaska is cold, but can I just say—it's freaking *cold*, and I was *not* prepared.

Yet another roar sounds in the distance, but as we finally clear the thicket of trees, it's hard to pay attention to anything but the huge building looming in front of us, growing closer with every second that passes.

Or should I say the huge *castle* looming in front of us, because the dwelling I'm looking at is nothing like a modern building. And absolutely nothing like any school I have *ever* seen. I tried to Google it before I got here, but apparently Katmere Academy is so elite even Google hasn't heard of it.

First of all, it's big. Like, really big...and sprawling. From here it looks like the brick wall in front of the castle stretches halfway around the mountain.

Second, it's elegant. Like, really, really elegant, with architecture I've only heard described in my art classes before. Vaulted arches, jutting buttresses, and giant, ornate windows dominate the structure.

And third, as we get closer, I can't help wondering if my eyes are deceiving me or if there are gargoyles—*actual gargoyles*—protruding from the top of the castle walls. I know it's just my imagination, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't half expect to see Quasimodo waiting for us when we finally get there.

Macy pulls up to the huge gate at the front of the school and enters a code. Seconds later, the gate swings open. And we're on our way again.

The closer we get, the more surreal everything feels. Like I'm trapped in a horror movie or Salvador Dalí painting. *Katmere Academy may be a Gothic castle, but at least there's no moat*, I tell myself as we break through one last copse of trees. *And no re-breathing dragon guarding the entrance*. Just a long, winding

driveway that looks like every other prep school driveway I've ever seen on TV—except for the fact that it's covered in snow. Big shock. And leads right up to the school's huge, incredibly ornate front doors.

Antique doors.

Castle doors.

I shake my head to clear it. I mean, what even is my life right now?

“Told you it wouldn't be bad,” Macy says as she pulls up to the front with a spray of snow. “We didn't even see a caribou, let alone a wolf.”

She's right, so I just nod and pretend I'm not completely overwhelmed.

Pretend like my stomach isn't tied into knots and my whole world hasn't turned upside down for the second time in a month.

Pretend like I'm okay.

“Let's bring your suitcases up to your room and get you unpacked. It'll help you relax.”

Macy climbs off the snowmobile, then takes off her helmet and her hat. It's the first time I've seen her without all the cold-weather gear, and I can't help smiling at her rainbow-colored hair. It's cut in a short, choppy style that should be smooshed and plastered to her head after three hours in a helmet, but instead it looks like she just walked out of a salon.

Which matches the rest of her, now that I think about it, considering her whole coordinating jacket, boots, and snow pants look kind of shouts cover model for some Alaskan wilderness fashion magazine.

On the other hand, I'm pretty sure my look says I've gone a couple of rounds with a pissed-off caribou. And lost. Badly. Which seems fair, since that's about how I feel.

Macy makes quick work of unloading my suitcases, and this

time I grab two of them. But I only make it a few steps up the very long walk to the castle's imposing front doors before I'm struggling to breathe.

"It's the altitude," Macy says as she takes one of the suitcases out of my hand. "We climbed pretty fast and, since you're coming from sea level, it's going to take a few days for you to get used to how thin the air is up here."

Just the idea of not being able to breathe sets off the beginnings of the panic attack I've barely kept at bay all day. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath—or as deep as I can out here—and try to ght it back.

In, hold for ve seconds, out. In, hold for ten seconds, out. In, hold for ve seconds, out. Just like Heather's mom taught me. Dr. Blake is a therapist, and she's been giving me tips on how to deal with the anxiety I've been having since my parents died. But I'm not sure her tips are up to combatting all this any more than I am.

Still, I can't stand here frozen forever, like one of the gargoyles staring down at me. Especially not when I can feel Macy's concern even with my eyes closed.

I take one more deep breath and open my eyes again, shooting my cousin a smile I'm far from feeling. "Fake it till you make it is still a thing, right?"

"It's going to be okay," she tells me, her own eyes wide with sympathy. "Just stand there and catch your breath. I'll carry your suitcases up to the door."

"I can do it."

"Seriously, it's okay. Just chill for a minute." She holds up her hand in the universal *stop* gesture. "We're not in any hurry."

Her tone begs me not to argue, so I don't. Especially since the panic attack I'm trying to fend off is only making it harder to breathe. Instead, I nod and watch as she carries my suitcases—

one at a time—up to the school’s front door.

As I do, a flash of color way above us catches my eye.

It’s there and gone so fast that even as I scan for it, I can’t be sure it ever really existed to begin with. Except—there it is again. A flash of red in the lit window of the tallest tower.

I don’t know who it is or why they even matter, but I stop where I am. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if whoever it is will make another appearance.

It isn’t long before they do.

I can’t see clearly—distance, darkness, and the distorted glass of the windows cover up a lot—but I get the impression of a strong jaw, shaggy dark hair, a red jacket against a background of light.

It’s not much, and there’s no reason for it to have caught my attention—certainly no reason for it to have *held* my attention—and yet I find myself staring up at the window so long that Macy has all three of my suitcases at the top of the stairs before I even realize it.

“Ready to try again?” she calls down from her spot near the front doors.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” I start up the last thirty or so steps, ignoring the way my head is spinning. Altitude sickness—one more thing I never had to worry about in San Diego.

Fantastic.

I glance up at the window one last time, not surprised at all to find that whoever was looking down at me is long gone. Still, an inexplicable shiver of disappointment works its way through me. It makes no sense, though, so I shrug it off. I have bigger things to worry about right now.

“This place is unbelievable,” I tell my cousin as she pushes open one of the doors and we walk inside.

And holy crap—I thought the whole castle thing with its

pointed archways and elaborate stonework was imposing from the outside. Now that I've seen the inside... Now that I've seen the inside, I'm pretty sure I should be curtsying right about now. Or at least bowing and scraping. I mean, wow. Just...wow.

I don't know where to look first—at the high ceiling with its elaborate black crystal chandelier or the roaring fireplace that dominates the whole right wall of the foyer.

In the end I go with the fireplace, because *heat*. And because it's freaking gorgeous, the mantel around it an intricate pattern of stone and stained glass that reflects the light of the flames through the whole room.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Macy says with a grin as she comes up behind me.

"Totally cool," I agree. "This place is..."

"Magic. I know." She wiggles her brows at me. "Want to see some more?"

I really do. I'm still far from sold on the Alaskan boarding school thing, but that doesn't mean I don't want to check out the castle. I mean, it's a *castle*, complete with stone walls and elaborate tapestries I can't help but want to stop and look at as we make our way through the entryway into some kind of common room.

The only problem is that the deeper we move into the school, the more students we come across. Some are standing around in scattered clumps, talking and laughing, while others are seated at several of the room's scarred wooden tables, leaning over books or phones or laptop screens. In the back corner of one room, sprawled out on several antique-looking couches in varying hues of red and gold, is a group of six guys playing Xbox on a huge TV, while a few other students crowd around to watch.

Only, as we get closer, I realize they aren't watching the video game. Or their books. Or even their phones. Instead, they're all

looking at *me* as Macy leads—and by leads, I mean parades—me through the center of the room.

My stomach clenches, and I duck my head to hide my very obvious discomfort. I get that everyone wants to check out the new girl—especially when she’s the headmaster’s niece—but understanding doesn’t make it any easier to bear the scrutiny from a bunch of strangers. Especially since I’m pretty sure I have the worst case of helmet hair ever recorded.

I’m too busy avoiding eye contact and regulating my breathing to talk as we make our way through the room, but as we exit into a long, winding hallway, I finally tell Macy, “I can’t believe you go to school here.”

“We *both* go to school here,” she reminds me with a quick grin.

“Yeah, but...” I just got here. And I’ve never felt more out of place in my life.

“But?” she repeats, eyebrows arched.

“It’s a lot.” I eye the gorgeous stained glass windows that run along the exterior wall and the elaborate carved molding that decorates the arched ceiling.

“It is.” She slows down until I catch up. “But it’s home.”

“Your home,” I whisper, doing my best not to think of the house I left behind, where my mother’s front porch wind chimes and whirligigs were the most wild-and-crazy thing about it.

“*Our* home,” she answers as she pulls out her phone and sends a quick text. “You’ll see. Speaking of which, my dad wants me to give you a choice about what kind of room situation you want.”

“Room situation?” I repeat, glancing around the castle while images of ghosts and animated suits of armor slide through my head.

“Well, all the single rooms have been assigned for this term. Dad told me we could move some people around to get you one, but I really hoped you might want to room with me instead.”

She smiles hopefully for a second, but it quickly fades as she continues. “I mean, I totally get that you might need some space to yourself right now after...”

And there’s that fade-out again. It gets to me, just like it does every time. Usually, I ignore it, but this time I can’t stop myself from asking, “After what?”

Just this once, I want someone else to say it. Maybe then it will feel more real and less like a nightmare.

Except as Macy gasps and turns the color of the snow outside, I realize it’s not going to be her. And that it’s unfair of me to expect it to be.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, and now it almost looks like she’s going to cry, which, no. Just no. We’re not going to go there. Not when the only thing currently holding me together is a snarky attitude and my ability to compartmentalize.

No way am I going to risk losing my grip on either. Not here, in front of my cousin and anybody else who might happen to pass by. And not now, when it’s obvious from all the stares that I’m totally the newest attraction at the zoo.

So instead of melting into Macy for the hug I so desperately need, instead of letting myself think about how much I miss home and my parents and my *life*, I pull back and give her the best smile I can manage. “Why don’t you show me to *our* room?”

The concern in her eyes doesn’t diminish, but the sunshine definitely makes another appearance. “*Our* room? Really?”

I sigh deep inside and kiss my dream of a little peaceful solitude goodbye. It’s not as hard as it should be, but then I’ve lost a lot more in the last month than my own space. “Really. Rooming with you sounds perfect.”

I’ve already upset her once, which is so not my style. Neither is getting someone kicked out of their room. Besides being rude and smacking of nepotism, it also seems like a sure re way to

piiss people off—something that is definitely not on my to-do list right now.

“Awesome!” Macy grins and throws her arms around me for a fast but powerful hug. Then she glances at her phone with a roll of her eyes. “Dad still hasn’t answered my text—he’s the worst about checking his phone. Why don’t you hang out here, and I’ll go get him? I know he wanted to see you as soon as we arrived.”

“I can come with you—”

“Please just sit, Grace.” She points at the ornate French-provincial-style chairs that flank a small chess table in an alcove to the right of the staircase. “I’m sure you’re exhausted and I’ve got this, honest. Relax a minute while I get Dad.”

Because she’s right—my head is aching and my chest still feels tight—I just nod and plop down in the closest chair. I’m beyond tired and want nothing more than to lean my head back against the chair and close my eyes for a minute. But I’m afraid I’ll fall asleep if I do. And no way am I running the risk of being the girl caught drooling all over herself in the hallway on her very first day...or ever, for that matter.

More to keep myself from drifting off than out of actual interest, I pick up one of the chess pieces in front of me. It’s made of intricately carved stone, and my eyes widen as I realize what I’m looking at. A perfect rendition of a vampire, right down to the black cape, frightening snarl, and bared fangs. It matches the Gothic castle vibe so well that I can’t help being amused. Plus, it’s gorgeously crafted.

Intrigued now, I reach for a piece from the other side. And nearly laugh out loud when I realize it’s a dragon—erce, regal, with giant wings. It’s absolutely beautiful.

The whole set is.

I put the piece down only to pick up another dragon. This one is lesserce, but with its sleepy eyes and folded wings, it’s

even more intricate. I look it over carefully, fascinated with the level of detail in the piece—everything from the perfect points on the wings to the careful curl of each talon reflects just how much care the artist put into the piece. I’ve never been a chess girl, but this set just might change my mind about the game.

When I put down this dragon piece, I go to the other side of the board and pick up the vampire queen. She’s beautiful, with long, flowing hair and an elaborately decorated cape.

“I’d be careful with that one if I were you. She’s got a nasty bite.” The words are low and rumble and so close that I nearly fall out of my chair. Instead, I jump up, plopping the chess piece down with a clatter, then whirl around—heart pounding—only to find myself face-to-face with the most intimidating guy I’ve ever seen. And not just because he’s hot...although he’s definitely that.

Still, there’s something more to him, something different and powerful and overwhelming, though I don’t have a clue what it is. I mean, sure. He has the kind of face nineteenth-century poets loved to write about—too intense to be beautiful and too striking to be anything else.

Skyscraper cheekbones.

Full red lips.

A jaw so sharp it could cut stone.

Smooth, alabaster skin.

And his eyes...a bottomless obsidian that see everything and show nothing, surrounded by the longest, most obscene lashes I’ve ever seen.

And even worse, those all-knowing eyes are laser-focused on me right now, and I’m suddenly terrified that he can see all the things I’ve worked so hard and so long to hide. I try to duck my head, try to yank my gaze from his, but I can’t. I’m trapped by his stare, hypnotized by the sheer magnetism rolling off him in waves.

I swallow hard to catch my breath.

It doesn't work.

And now he's grinning, one corner of his mouth turning up in a crooked little smile that I feel in every single cell. Which only makes it worse, because that smirk says he knows exactly what kind of effect he's having on me. And, worse, that he's enjoying it.

Annoyance ashes through me at the realization, melting the numbness that's surrounded me since my parents' deaths. Waking me from the stupor that's the only thing that's kept me from screaming all day, every day, at the unfairness of it all. At the pain and horror and helplessness that have taken over my whole life.

It's not a good feeling. And the fact that it's this guy—with the smirk and the face and the cold eyes that refuse to relinquish their hold on me even as they demand that I don't look too closely—just pisses me off more.

It's that anger that nally gives me the strength to break free of his gaze. I rip my eyes away, then search desperately for something else—anything else—to focus on.

Unfortunately, he's standing right in front of me, so close that he's blocking my view of anything else.

Determined to avoid his eyes, I look anywhere but. And land instead on his long, lean body. Then really wish I hadn't, because the black jeans and T-shirt he's wearing only emphasize his flat stomach and hard, well-defined biceps. Not to mention the double-wide shoulders that are absolutely responsible for blocking my view in the first place.

Add in the thick, dark hair that's worn a little too long, so that it falls forward into his face and skims low across his insane cheekbones, and there's nothing to do but give in. Nothing to do but admit that—obnoxious smirk or not—this boy is sexy as hell.

A little wicked, a lot wild, and *all* dangerous.

What little oxygen I've been able to pull into my lungs in this high altitude completely disappears with the realization. Which only makes me madder. Because, seriously. When exactly did I become the heroine in some YA romance? The new girl swooning over the hottest, most unattainable boy in school?

Gross. And so not happening.

Determined to nip whatever this is in the bud, I force myself to look at his face again. This time, as our gazes meet and clash, I realize that it doesn't matter if I'm acting like some giant romantic cliché.

Because he isn't.

One glance and I know that this dark boy with the closed-off eyes and the fuck-you attitude isn't the hero of anyone's story. Least of all mine.

3

Vampire Queens Aren't the Only Ones with a Nasty Bite

Determined not to let this staring contest that feels a little like a show of dominance go on any longer, I cast around for something to break the tension. And settle on a response to the only thing he's actually said to me so far.

"Who's got a nasty bite?"

He reaches past me and picks up the piece I dropped, holds the queen for me to see. "She's really not very nice."

I stare at him. "She's a chess piece."

His obsidian eyes gleam back. "Your point?"

"My point is, she's a *chess* piece. She's made of *marble*. She can't bite anyone."

He inclines his head in a *you never know* gesture. "'There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

"Earth," I correct before I can think better of it.

He crooks one midnight-black brow in question, so I continue. "The quote is, 'There are more things in heaven and *earth*, Horatio.'"

"Is it now?" His face doesn't change, but there's something mocking in his tone that wasn't there before, like I'm the one who

made the mistake, not him. But I know I'm right—my AP English class just finished reading *Hamlet* last month, and my teacher spent forever on that quote. "I think I like my version better."

"Even though it's wrong?"

"Especially because it's wrong."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just shake my head. And wonder how lost I'll get if I go looking for Macy and Uncle Finn right now. Probably very, considering the size of this place, but I'm beginning to think I should risk it. Because the longer I stand here, the more I realize this guy is as terrifying as he is intriguing.

I'm not sure which is worse. And I'm growing less sure by the second that I want to find out.

"I need to go." I force the words past a jaw I didn't even know I'd been clenching.

"Yeah, you do." He takes a small step back, nods toward the common room Macy and I just walked through. "The door's that way."

It's not the response I'm expecting, and it throws me off guard. "So what, I shouldn't let it hit me on the way out?"

He shrugs. "As long as you leave this school, it doesn't matter to me if it hits you or not. I warned your uncle you wouldn't be safe here, but he obviously doesn't like you much."

Anger ashes through me at his words, burning away the last of the numbness that has plagued me. "Who exactly are you supposed to be anyway? Katmere's very own unwelcome wagon?"

"Unwelcome wagon?" His tone is as obnoxious as his face. "Believe me, this is the nicest greeting you're going to get here."

"This is it, huh?" I raise my brows, spread my arms out wide. "The big welcome to Alaska?"

"More like, welcome to hell. Now get the fuck out."

The last is said in a snarl that yanks my heart into my throat.

But it also slams my temper straight into the stratosphere. “Is it that stick up your ass that makes you such a jerk?” I demand. “Or is this just your regular, charming personality?”

The words come out fast and furious, before I even know I’m going to say them. But once they’re out, I don’t regret them. How can I when shock hits across his face, nally erasing that annoying smirk of his?

At least for a minute. Then he res back, “I’ve got to say, if that’s the best you’ve got, I give you about an hour.”

I know I shouldn’t ask, but he looks so smug, I can’t help myself. “Before what?”

“Before something eats you.” He doesn’t say it, but the *obviously* is definitely implied. Which only pisses me off more.

“Seriously? That’s what you decided to go with?” I roll my eyes. “Bite me, dude.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.” He looks me up and down. “I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t even make an appetizer.”

But then he’s stepping closer, leaning down until he’s all but whispering in my ear. “Maybe a quick snack, though.” His teeth close with a loud, sharp snap that makes me jump and shiver all at the same time.

Which I hate...so, so much.

I glance around us, curious if anyone else is witnessing this mess. But where everyone only had eyes for me earlier, they seem to be going out of their way not to glance in my direction now. One lanky boy with thick red hair even keeps his head so awkwardly turned to the side while walking across the room that he almost runs into another student.

Which tells me everything I need to know about this guy.

Determined to regain control of the situation—and myself—I take a big step back. Then, ignoring my pounding heart and the pterodactylsapping around in my stomach, I demand, “What

is *wrong* with you?” I mean, seriously. He’s got the manners of a rabid polar bear.

“Got a century or three?” His smirk is back—he’s obviously proud of getting to me—and for a moment, just a moment, I think about how satisfying it would be to punch him right in the center of that annoying mouth of his.

“You know what? You really don’t have to be such a—”

“Don’t tell me what I have to be. Not when you don’t have a clue what you’ve wandered into here.”

“Oh no!” I do a mock-afraid face. “Is this the part of the story where you tell me about the big, bad monsters out here in the big, bad Alaskan wilderness?”

“No, this is the part of the story where I show you the big, bad monsters right here in this castle.” He steps forward, closing the small distance I managed to put between us.

And there goes my heart again, beating like a caged bird desperate to escape.

I hate it.

I hate that he’s bested me, and I hate that being this close to him makes me feel a bunch of things I shouldn’t for a guy who has been a total jerk to me. I hate even more that the look in his eyes says he knows exactly how I’m feeling.

The fact that I’m reacting so strongly to him when all he seems to feel for me is contempt is humiliating, so I take one trembling step back. Then I take another. And another.

But he follows suit, moving one step forward for every step I take backward, until I’m caught between him and the chess table pressing into the back of my thighs. And even though there’s nowhere to go, even though I’m stuck right here in front of him, he leans closer still, *gets* closer still, until I can feel his warm breath on my cheek and the brush of his silky black hair against my skin.

“What are—?” What little breath I’ve managed to recover

catches in my throat. “What are you doing?” I demand as he reaches past me.

He doesn’t answer at first. But when he pulls away, he’s got one of the dragon pieces in his hand. He holds it up for me to see, that single eyebrow of his arched provocatively, and answers. “You’re the one who wanted to see the monsters.”

This one is fierce, eyes narrowed, talons raised, mouth open to show off sharp, jagged teeth. But it’s still just a chess piece. “I’m not afraid of a three-inch dragon.”

“Yeah, well, you should be.”

“Yeah, well, I’m *not*.” The words come out more strangled than I intend, because he may have taken a step back, but he’s still standing too close. So close that I can feel his breath on my cheek and the warmth radiating from his body. So close that one deep breath will end with my chest pressing against his.

The thought sets off a whole new kaleidoscope of butterflies deep inside me. I can’t move back any farther, but I can *lean* back over the table a little. Which I do—all while those dark, fathomless eyes of his watch my every move.

Silence stretches between us for one...ten...twenty-ve seconds before he finally asks, “So if you aren’t afraid of things that go bump in the night, what *are* you afraid of?”

Images of my parents’ mangled car crash through my brain, followed by pictures of their battered bodies. I was the only family they had in San Diego—or anywhere, really, except for Finn and Macy—so I’m the one who had to go to the morgue. I’m the one who had to identify their bodies. Who had to see them all bruised and bloody and broken before the funeral home had a chance to put them back together again.

The familiar anguish wells up inside me, but I do what I’ve been doing for weeks now. I shove it back down. Pretend it doesn’t exist. “Not much,” I tell him as apologetically as I can

manage. “There’s not much to be afraid of when you’ve already lost everything that matters.”

He freezes at my words, his whole body tensing up so much that it feels like he might shatter. Even his eyes change, the wildness disappearing between one blink and the next until only stillness remains.

Stillness and an agony so deep I can barely see it behind the layers and layers of defenses he’s erected.

But I *can* see it. More, I can *feel* it calling to my own pain.

It’s an awful and awe-inspiring feeling at the same time. So awful I can barely stand it. So awe-inspiring that I can’t stop it.

So I don’t. And neither does he.

Instead, we stand there, frozen. Devasted. Connected in a way I can feel but can’t comprehend by our very separate horrors.

I don’t know how long we stay like that, staring into each other’s eyes. Acknowledging each other’s pain because we can’t acknowledge our own.

Long enough for the animosity to drain right out of me.

Long enough for me to see the silver flecks in the midnight of his eyes—distant stars shining through the darkness he makes no attempt to hide.

More than long enough for me to get my rampaging heart under control. At least until he reaches out and gently takes hold of one of my million curls.

And just that easily, I forget how to breathe again.

Heat slams through me as he stretches out the curl, warming me up for the first time since I opened the door of Philip’s plane in Healy. It’s confusing and overwhelming and I don’t have a clue what to do about it.

Five minutes ago, this guy was being a total douche to me. And now...now I don’t know anything. Except that I need space. And to sleep. And a chance to just breathe for a few minutes.

With that in mind, I bring my hands up and push at his shoulders in an effort to get him to give me a little room. But it's like pushing a wall of granite. He doesn't budge.

At least not until I whisper, "Please."

He waits a second longer, maybe two or three—until my head is muddled and my hands are shaking—before he finally takes a step back and lets the curl go.

As he does, he sweeps a hand through his dark hair. His longish bangs part just enough to reveal a jagged scar from the center of his left eyebrow to the left corner of his mouth. It's thin and white, barely noticeable against the paleness of his skin, but it's there nonetheless—especially if you look at the wicked vee it causes at the end of his dark eyebrow.

It should make him less attractive, should do something—anything—to negate the incredible power of his looks. But somehow the scar only emphasizes the danger, turning him from just another pretty boy with angelic looks into someone a million times more compelling. A fallen angel with a bad-boy vibe for miles...and a million stories to back that vibe up.

Combined with the anguish I just felt inside him, it makes him more...human. More relatable and more devastating, despite the darkness that rolls off him in waves. A scar like this only comes from an unimaginable injury. Hundreds of stitches, multiple operations, months—maybe even years—of recovery. I hate that he suffered like that, wouldn't wish it on anyone, let alone this boy who frustrates and terrifies and excites me all at the same time.

He knows I noticed the scar—I can see it in the way his eyes narrow. In the way his shoulders stiffen and his hands clench into fists. In the way he ducks his head so that his hair falls over his cheek again.

I hate that, hate that he thinks he has to hide something that he should wear as a badge of honor. It takes a lot of strength to

get through something like this, a lot of strength to come out the other side of it, and he should be proud of that strength. Not ashamed of the mark it's left.

I reach out before I make a conscious decision to do so, cup his scarred cheek in my hand.

His dark eyes blaze, and I think he's going to shove me away. But in the end, he doesn't. He just stands there and lets me stroke my thumb back and forth across his cheek—across his scar—for several long moments.

"I'm sorry," I whisper when I can finally get my voice past the painful lump of sympathy in my throat. "This must have hurt horribly."

He doesn't answer. Instead, he closes his eyes, sinks into my palm, takes one long, shuddering breath.

Then he's pulling back, stepping away, putting real distance between us for the first time since he snuck up behind me, which suddenly feels like a lifetime ago.

"I don't understand you," he tells me suddenly, his black-magic voice so quiet that I have to strain to hear him.

"There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," I answer, deliberately using his earlier misquote.

He shakes his head as if trying to clear it. Takes a deep breath, then blows it out slowly. "If you won't leave—"

"I *can't* leave," I interject. "I have nowhere else to go. My parents—"

"Are dead. I know." He smiles grimly. "Fine. If you're not going to leave, then you need to listen to me very, very carefully."

"What do you—?"

"Keep your head down. Don't look too closely at anyone or anything." He leans forward, his voice dropping to a low rumble as he finishes. "And always, *always* watch your back."

4

Shining Armor Is So Last Century

“G^race!” My uncle Finn’s voice booms down the hallway, and I turn toward him instinctively. I smile and give him a little wave even though there’s a part of me that feels frozen in place after being on the receiving end of what sounds an awful lot like a warning.

I turn back to confront Mr. Tall, Dark, and Surly, to figure out exactly what it is he thinks I need to be so afraid of—but he’s gone.

I glance around, determined to figure out where he went, but before I can spot him, Uncle Finn is wrapping me in a huge bear hug and lifting me off my feet. I hang on for dear life, letting the comforting scent of him—the same woodsy scent my dad used to have—wash over me.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t meet you at the airport. A couple of kids got hurt, and I had to take care of things here.”

“Don’t worry about it. Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” He shakes his head. “Just a couple of idiots being idiots. You know how boys are.”

I start to tell him that I have no idea how boys are—my last encounter is proof of that—but some weird instinct I don’t

understand warns me not to bring up the guy I was just talking to. So I don't. Instead, I laugh and nod along.

"Enough about the duties of a headmaster," he says, pulling me in for another, quicker hug before leaning back to study my face. "How was your trip? And more importantly, how are you?"

"It was long," I tell him. "But it was fine. And I'm okay." The phrase of the day.

"I'm pretty sure 'okay' is a bit of an overstatement." He sighs. "I can only imagine how hard the last few weeks have been for you. I wish I could have stayed longer after the funeral."

"It's fine. The estate company you called took care of almost everything. And Heather and her mom took care of the rest. I swear."

It's obvious that he wants to say more but just as obvious that he doesn't want to get into anything too deep in the middle of the hallway. So in the end, he just nods and says, "Okay, then. I'll leave you to settle in with Macy. But come see me tomorrow morning, and we'll talk about your schedule. Plus, I'll introduce you to our counselor, Dr. Wainwright. I think you'll like her."

Right. Dr. Wainwright. The school counselor who is also a therapist, according to Heather's mom. And not just any therapist. *My* therapist, apparently, since she and my uncle both think I need one. I would argue, but since I've had to work really hard not to cry in the shower every morning for the last month, I figure they might be on to something.

"Okay, sure."

"Are you hungry? I'll have dinner sent up, since you missed it. And there's something we really need to discuss." He narrows his eyes at me, looks me over. "Although...how are you doing with the altitude?"

"I'm okay. Not great, but okay."

"Yeah." He looks me up and down, then harrumphs

sympathetically before turning to Macy. “Make sure she takes a couple of Advil when she gets to your room. And that she drinks plenty of water. I’ll send up some soup and ginger ale. Let’s keep things light tonight, see how you’re doing in the morning.”

“Light” sounds perfect, since even the thought of eating right now makes me want to throw up. “Okay, sure.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Grace. And I promise, things will get easier.”

I nod, because what else am I going to do? I’m not glad I’m here—Alaska feels like the moon right now—but I’m all for things getting easier. I just want to go one day without feeling like shit.

I was hoping tomorrow would be it, but since I met Tall, Dark, and Surly, all I can think about is the way he looked when he told me to leave Katmere. And the way he glowered when I refused. So...probably not.

Figuring we’re done here, I reach for the handle of one of my suitcases. But my uncle says, “Don’t worry about those. I’ll get one of the guys to—” He breaks off and calls down the hallway. “Hey, Flint! Come here and give me a hand, will you?”

Macy makes a sound halfway between a groan and a death rattle as her father starts down the corridor, presumably trying to catch up with this Flint person.

“Come on, let’s go before Dad chases him down.” She grabs two of my suitcases and practically runs for the stairs.

“What’s wrong with Flint?” I ask as I grab my last remaining suitcase and try to keep up with her.

“Nothing! He’s great. Amazing. Also, superhot. He doesn’t need to see us like this.”

I can see how she could think he doesn’t need to see *me* like this, since I’m pretty sure I look half dead. But, “You look great.”

“Um, no. No, I don’t. Now, come on. Let’s get out of—”

“Hey, Mace. Don’t worry about those suitcases. I’ll get them for you.” A deep voice booms from several steps below us, and I turn around just in time to see a guy in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt charging toward me. He’s tall—like, nearly as tall as Tall, Dark, and Surly—and just as muscular. But that’s where the resemblance ends, because everywhere that other guy was dark and cold, this one is light and re.

Bright-amber eyes that seem to burn from within.

Warm brown skin.

Black afro that looks amazing on him.

And perhaps most interesting of all, there’s a smile in his eyes that is as different from the other guy’s iciness as the stars just outside the windows are from the endless midnight blue of the sky.

“We’ve got them,” Macy says, but he ignores her, bounding up the stairs three at a time.

He stops next to me first, gently eases the handle of my suitcase from the near death grip I’ve got on it. “Hey there, New Girl. How are you?”

“I’m okay, just...”

“She’s sick, Flint,” my uncle calls from below. “The altitude is getting to her.”

“Oh, right.” His eyes blaze with sympathy. “That sucks.”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“Well, come on then, New Girl. Climb on my back. I’ll give you a ride up the stairs.”

Just the idea has my stomach revolting even more. “Uh, what? N-No, that’s okay.” I back away from him a little. “I can walk—”

“Come on.” He bends his knees to make it easier for me to grab on to his super-broad shoulders. “You’ve got a long three flights ahead of you.”

They *are* a long three flights, and still I would seriously rather

die than climb on a random stranger's back. "Pretty sure they'll be longer for you if you're carrying me."

"Nah. You're so little, I won't even notice. Now, are you going to get on or am I going to pick you up and toss you over my shoulder?"

"You wouldn't," I tell him.

"Try me," he says with an endearing grin that makes me laugh.

But I'm still not getting on his back. No way is one of the hottest guys at the school going to carry me up these stairs—on his back or over his shoulder. No. Freaking. Way. I don't care how much the altitude is bothering me.

"Thanks for the offer. Really." I give him the best smile I can manage right now. "But I think I'm just going to walk slowly. I'll be fine."

Flint shakes his head. "Stubborn much?" But he doesn't push the issue the way I'm afraid he will. Instead, he asks, "Can I at least help you up the stairs? I'd hate to see you fall down a night or two on your very first day."

"Help how?" Suspicion has me narrowing my eyes at him.

"Like this." He slides his arm around my waist.

I stiffen at the unexpected contact. "What are you—?"

"This way you can at least lean on me if the steps get to be too much. Deal?"

I start to say *absolutely no deal*, but the laughter in his bright-amber eyes as he looks down at me—expecting me to do just that—has me changing my mind. Well, that and the fact that Uncle Finn and Macy both seem totally fine with the whole thing.

"Okay, fine. Deal," I say with a sigh as the room starts to spin around me. "I'm Grace, by the way."

"Yeah, I know. Foster told us you were coming." He heads toward the stairs, propelling me along with his right arm across my back. "And I'm Flint."

He pauses at the foot of the stairs for a moment, reaching for my bags.

“Oh, don’t worry about the suitcases,” Macy says, her voice about three octaves higher than it normally is. “I can get them.”

“No doubt, Mace.” He winks at her. “But you might as well use me if I’m volunteering.” Then he grabs two of the bags in his left hand and heads up the stairs.

We start out going slowly, thankfully, as I’m struggling to breathe after only a few steps. But before long, we’re moving fast—not because I’ve gotten used to the altitude but because Flint has taken on most of my weight and is basically carrying me up the stairs with an arm around my waist.

I know he’s strong—all those muscles under his shirt definitely aren’t for show—but I can’t believe he’s *this* strong. I mean, he’s carrying two heavy bags *and* me up the stairs, and he isn’t even breathing hard.

We end up beating Macy, who is huffing and puffing her way up the final few steps with my last bag, to the top.

“You can let me down now,” I tell him as I start to squirm away. “Since you pretty much carried me anyway.”

“Just trying to help,” he says with a wiggle of his eyebrows that has me laughing despite my embarrassment.

He lets me down, and I expect him to pull away when my feet are finally back on the ground. Instead, he keeps his arm around my waist and moves me across the landing.

“You can let go,” I say again. “I’m fine now.” But my knees wobble as I say it, another wave of dizziness moving through me.

I try to hide it, but I must do a bad job because the look Flint is giving me goes from amused to concerned in the space of two seconds flat. Then he shakes his head. “Yeah, until you pass out and pitch over the railing. Nope, Headmaster Foster put me in charge of getting you to your room safely and that is

what I'm going to do."

I start to argue, but I'm feeling just unsteady enough that I decide accepting his help might actually be the better part of valor. So I just nod as he turns around and calls to my cousin, "You okay there, Mace?"

"Just great," she gasps, all but dragging my suitcase across the landing.

"Told you I could have taken it," Flint says to her.

"It's not the weight of the suitcase," she snipes back. "It's how fast I had to carry it."

"I've got longer legs." He glances around. "So, which hallway am I taking her to?"

"We're in the North wing," Macy says, pointing to the hallway directly to our left. "Follow me."

Despite all her huffing and puffing, she takes off at a near run, with Flint and me hot on her heels. As we race across the landing, I can't help but be grateful for the supporting arm he's still lending me. I've always thought I was in pretty good shape, but life in Alaska obviously takes it to a whole new level.

There are four sets of double doors surrounding the landing—all heavy, carved wood—and Macy stops at the set marked North. But before she can reach for the handle, the doors open so fast that she barely manages to jump back before it hits her.

"Hey, what was that ab—" She breaks off when four guys walk through the door like she's not even there. All four are brooding and sexy as all get out, but I've only got eyes for one of them.

The one from downstairs.

He doesn't have eyes for me, though. Instead, he walks right by—face blank and gaze glacier cold—like I'm not even here.

Like he doesn't even see me, even though he has to skirt me to get by.

Like he didn't just spend fifteen minutes talking to me earlier.

Except...except, as he passes, his shoulder brushes against the side of my arm. Even after everything we said to each other, heat sizzles through me at the contact. And though logic tells me the touch was accidental, I can't shake the idea that he did it on purpose. Any more than I can stop myself from turning to watch him walk away.

Just because I'm angry, I assure myself. Just because I want the chance to tell him off for having disappeared like that.

Macy doesn't say anything to him, or the other guys, and neither does Flint. Instead, they wait for them to be out of the way and then head down the hallway like nothing happened. Like we didn't just get blatantly snubbed.

Flint tightens his warm arm around my waist, and I can't help but wonder why the guy with ice in his veins makes my skin tingle and the one literally lending me his warmth leaves me cold. Looks like my messed-up life is totally messing with my brain as well...

I want to ask who they are—want to ask who *he* is so I finally have a name to go with his insane body and even more insane face—but now doesn't feel like the time. So I keep my mouth shut and concentrate on looking around instead of obsessing over some guy I don't even like.

The North hallway is lined with heavy wooden doors on both sides, most with some kind of decoration hanging on them. Dried roses in the shape of an *X* on one, what looks to be an elaborate set of wind chimes on another, and a ton of bat stickers all over a third. I can't decide if the person living there has dreams of being a chiropterologist or if they are simply a fan of Batman.

Either way, I'm absurdly fascinated by all the decorations—especially the wind chimes, as I can't imagine there's much wind in an indoor hallway—and not at all surprised when Macy stops at the most elaborately adorned door of them all. A garland of

fresh flowers winds its way around the doorframe, and lines of threaded, multicolored crystals fall from the top of the door to the bottom in a fancy kind of beaded curtain.

“Here we are,” Macy says as she throws the door open with a flourish. “Home sweet home.”

Before I can take a step over the threshold, another hot guy dressed entirely in black passes by. And though he pays us no more attention than any of the others did at the North hallway door, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Because even though I’m sure I’m imagining things, it suddenly feels an awful lot like I’m being watched.

Things Hot Pink and Harry Styles Have in Common

“Which bed is hers?” Flint asks as he propels me over the threshold.

“The one on the right,” Macy answers. Her voice is back to sounding funny, so I glance over my shoulder to make sure she’s okay.

She looks fine, but her eyes are huge, and they keep darting from Flint to the rest of the room and back again. I give her a *what’s up* look, but she just shakes her head in the universal sign for *don’t say ANYTHING*. So I don’t.

Instead, I look around the room I’m going to share with my cousin for the next several months. It takes only a couple of seconds for me to figure out that no matter what she said about being okay with me having my own room, she had planned on me rooming with her all along.

For starters, all her possessions are arranged neatly on one rainbow-colored side of the room. And for another, the spare bed is already made up in—of course—hot-pink sheets and a hot-pink comforter with huge white hibiscus flowers all over it.

“I know you like surfing,” she says, watching me eye the blindingly bright comforter. “I thought you might like something

that reminds you of home.”

That shade of pink reminds me of surfer Barbie more than it reminds me of home, but no way am I going to say that to her. Not when it’s obvious she’s gone out of her way to make me feel comfortable. I appreciate she cared enough to try. “Thanks. It’s really nice.”

“It’s definitely cheerful,” Flint says as he helps me to the bed. The look he gives me is totally tongue-in-cheek, but that only makes me like him more. The fact that he realizes how absurd Macy’s decorating choices are but is way too nice to say anything that might hurt her feelings totally works for me. If I’m lucky, maybe I’ve made another friend.

He drops my suitcases at the foot of the bed, then steps back as I sink onto my mattress, my head still spinning a little.

“Do you guys need anything else before I head out?” Flint asks after we are completely disentangled.

“I’m good,” I tell him. “Thanks for the help.”

“Any time, New Girl.” He flashes me a ten-thousand-kilowatt smile. “Anytime.”

I’m pretty sure Macy whimpers a little at the sight of that grin, but she doesn’t say anything. Just kind of walks to the door and smiles weakly as she waits for him to leave. Which he does with a little wave for me and a last bump for her on his way out.

The second the door is closed, and locked, behind him, I say, “You’ve got a crush on Flint.”

“I don’t!” she answers, looking wildly at the door, like he can hear us through the thick wood.

“Oh yeah? Then what was all that about?”

“All what?” Her voice is about three octaves too high.

“You know.” I wring my hands, bat my lashes, give a halfway-decent imitation of the sounds she’s been making since her father begged down Flint for help.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“You totally sound like that,” I tell her. “But I don’t get it. If you like him, why didn’t you try to talk to him more? I mean, it was, like, a perfect opportunity.”

“I don’t *like* him like him. I don’t!” she insists with a laugh when I give her a look. “I mean, yeah, he’s gorgeous and nice and supersmart, but I’ve got a boyfriend who I really care about. It’s just, Flint is so...*Flint*. You know? And he was in our *room, next to your bed*.” She sighs. “The mind boggles.”

“Don’t you mean swoons?” I tease.

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a real crush. It’s more like...”

“More like the aura surrounding the most popular boy in school?”

“Yes, that! Exactly that. Except Flint’s not quite that high on the list. Jaxon and his group have the top positions pretty much sewn up.”

“Jaxon?” I ask, trying to sound casual even as my whole body goes on high alert. I don’t know how I know she’s talking about *him*, but I do. “Who’s Jaxon?”

“Jaxon Vega.” She fake swoons. “I have *no* idea how to explain Jaxon, except... Oh, wait! You saw him.”

“I did?” I try to ignore the way ying dinosaurs have once again taken up residence in my stomach.

“Yeah, on the way to our room. He was one of the guys who nearly hit me in the face with the door. The really hot one out in front.”

I play dumb even though my heart is suddenly beating way too fast. “You mean the ones who completely ignored us?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “Don’t take it personally, though. That’s just the way Jaxon is. He’s...angsty.”

He’s a lot more than angsty, if our conversation a little while

ago is anything to go by. But I'm not about to bring up what happened to Macy when I don't even know how I feel about it yet.

So I do the only thing I can do. I change the subject. "Thanks so much for setting up the room for me. I appreciate it."

"Oh, don't worry about it." She waves it away. "It was no big deal."

"I'm pretty sure it *was* a big deal. I don't know that many companies that deliver ninety minutes outside of Healy, Alaska."

She blushes a little and looks away, like she doesn't want me to know just how much trouble she's gone through to make me feel at home. But then she shrugs and says, "Yeah, well, my dad knows all the ones that do. It wasn't a problem."

"Still, you're totally my favorite cousin."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm your only cousin."

"Doesn't mean you aren't also my favorite."

"My dad uses that line."

"That you're his favorite cousin?" I tease.

"You know what I mean." She sighs in obvious exasperation. "You're a dork; you know that, right?"

"I absolutely do, yes."

She laughs, even as she crosses to the mini fridge next to her desk. "Here, drink this," she says as she pulls out a large bottle of water and tosses it to me. "And I'll show you the rest."

"The rest?"

"Yeah. There's more." She crosses to one of the closets and pulls open the doors. "I figured your wardrobe wasn't exactly equipped for Alaska, so I supplemented a little."

"*A little* is an understatement, don't you think?"

Lined up inside the closet are several black skirts and pants, along with white and black blouses, a bunch of black or purple polo shirts, two black blazers, and two red and black plaid scarves. There are also a bunch of lined hoodies, a few thick

sweaters, a heavy jacket, and two more pairs of snow pants—only a few of which are in hot pink, thankfully. On the floor are a few pairs of new shoes and snow boots, along with a large box of what looks like books and school supplies.

“There are socks and thermal underwear and some fleece shirts and pants in your dresser drawers. I figure moving here is hard enough. I didn’t want you to have to worry about anything extra.”

And just like that, she manages to knock down the first line of my defenses. Tears bloom in my eyes, and I look away, blinking quickly in an effort to hide what a disaster I am.

It obviously doesn’t work, because Macy makes a small exclamation of dismay. She’s across the room in the blink of an eye, pulling me into a coconut-scented hug that seems incongruous here at the center of Alaska. It’s also strangely comforting.

“It sucks, Grace. The whole thing just totally sucks, and I wish I could make it better. I wish I could just wave a wand and put everything back the way it used to be.”

I nod because there’s a lump in my throat. And because there’s nothing else to say. Except that I wish for that, too.

I wish that the last words my parents and I spoke weren’t hurled at each other in a fight that seems so stupid now.

I wish that my dad hadn’t lost control of the car two hours later and driven himself and my mother off a cliff, plunging hundreds of feet into the ocean.

Most of all, I wish that I could smell my mother’s perfume or hear the deep rumble of my father’s voice just one more time.

I let Macy hug me as long as I can stand it—which is only about five seconds or so—and then I pull away. I’ve never particularly liked being touched, and it’s only gotten worse since my parents died.

“Thanks for—” I gesture to the bed and closet. “All of this.”

“Of course. And I want you to know, if you ever need to talk or whatever, I’m here. I know it’s not the same, because my mom left; she didn’t die.” She swallows hard, takes a deep breath before continuing. “But I know what it’s like to feel alone. And I’m a good listener.”

It’s the first time she’s actually used the word “die.” The first time she’s actually acknowledged what happened to my parents by name. The fact that she has makes it so much easier to say, “Thank you,” and mean it, even as I remember that Jaxon didn’t shy away from it, either. He might have been a jackass all the way around, but he called my parents’ death what it was. And didn’t treat me like I was going to shatter under the weight of one harsh word.

Maybe that’s why I’m still thinking about him when I should be writing him off for the jerk he is.

She nods, watching me out of worried eyes that only make me feel worse.

“I should probably get unpacked.” I look down at my suitcases with distaste. It feels like I just packed them. The last thing I want to do is empty them right now. Not when my electric-pink bed is calling me like a beacon.

“I can totally help with that.” She points at a door across the room. “Why don’t you go take a shower and get into your pajamas? I’ll check on the soup my dad said he sent up. Then you can eat, take some Advil, and get some rest. Hopefully, when you wake up, you’ll be better acclimated to the altitude.”

“That sounds...” I really do feel crappy, and a shower sounds amazing. As does sleep, considering I’ve been so nervous about the move that I haven’t gotten much in the last week or so.

“Perfect, right?” She lls in the blank.

“It really does, yeah.”

“Good.” She walks to her closet and pulls out a couple extra towels. “If you want to hop in the shower, I’ll get you some warm soup and hopefully, in half an hour, this whole day will feel a lot better.”

“Thanks, Macy.” I turn to look at her. “I mean it.”

A grin splits her face and lights up her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m out of the shower and dressed in my favorite pair of pajamas—a Harry Styles T-shirt from his first solo tour and a pair of blue fleece pants with white and yellow daisies all over them—only to find Macy dancing around the room to “Watermelon Sugar.”

Talk about kismet.

Macy oohs and aahs over the concert tee—as she should—but other than that, she pretty much leaves me alone. Except to make sure I drink an entire thirty-two-ounce bottle of water *and* take the Advil she left on my nightstand.

There’s a bowl of chicken noodle soup on my nightstand, too, but right now I don’t have the energy to eat. Instead, I climb into bed and pull the hot-pink covers over my head.

The last thing I think about before drifting off to sleep is that—despite everything—tonight is the first time I’ve taken a shower without struggling not to cry since my parents died.

6

No, I Really Don't Want to Build a Snowman

I wake up slowly, head fuzzy and body as heavy as stone. It takes me a second to remember where I am—Alaska—and that the light snores that fill the room belong to Macy and not Heather, whose room I crashed in for the last three weeks.

I sit up, trying to ignore the unfamiliar howls and roars—and even the occasional animalistic scream—in the distance. It's enough to freak anyone out, let alone a girl born and raised in the city, but I comfort myself by remembering there's a giant castle wall between me and all the animals making those noises...

Still, if I'm being honest, it isn't the utter foreignness of this place that has my brain racing overtime. Yes, being in Alaska is bizarre on what feels like every level. But once I banish thoughts of my old life, it isn't Alaska that woke me up at—I glance at the clock—3:23 in the morning. And it's not Alaska that's keeping me awake.

It's him.

Jaxon Vega.

I don't know anything more about him than I did when he left me standing in the hallway, angry and confused and hurting more than I want to admit—except that he's the most popular guy

at Katmere Academy. And that he's angsty, which...no kidding. I didn't exactly need a crystal ball to guess that.

But seriously, nothing Macy told me matters, because I've decided I don't want to know any more about him.

More, I don't want to know *him*.

Yet when I close my eyes, I can still see him so perfectly. His clenched jaw. The thin scar that runs the length of his face. The black ice of his eyes that lets me see for a second—just a second—that he knows as much about pain as I do. Maybe more.

It's that pain I think of most as I sit here in the dark. That pain that makes me worry for him when I shouldn't give a damn one way or the other.

I wonder how he got that scar. However it happened, it had to have been awful. Terrifying. Traumatic. Devastating.

I figure that's probably why he was so cold to me. Why he tried to get me to leave and, when I wouldn't, ended up delivering that ridiculous and—I admit, mildly disconcerting—warning.

Macy said he was angsty...does that mean he treats everyone the way he treated me? And if so, why? Because he's just a jerk? Or because he's in so much pain that the only way he can handle it is to make everyone afraid of him so that he can keep them at a distance? Or do people see his scar and his scowl and decide to keep their distance all on their own?

It's an awful thought but one I can totally relate to. Not the *people being afraid of me* part but definitely the *people keeping their distance* part. Except for Heather, most of my old friends drifted away after my parents died. Heather's mom told me it was because my parents' deaths reminded them of their own mortality, reminded them that their parents could die at any time. And so could they.

Logically, I knew she was right, that they were just trying to protect themselves the only way they knew how. But that didn't

make the distance any less painful. And it definitely didn't make the loneliness any easier to bear.

Reaching for my phone, I shoot off a couple of quick texts to Heather—which I should have done as soon as I got here last night—telling her that I'm safe and explaining about the altitude sickness.

Then I lay back down, try to will myself to go back to sleep. But I'm wide-awake now, thoughts of Alaska and school and Jaxon blurring together in my head until all I want is for them to just stop.

But they don't stop, and suddenly my heart is pounding, my skin prickling with awareness. I press a hand to my chest, take a couple of deep breaths, try to figure out what has me so alarmed that I can barely breathe.

And suddenly it's right there. All the thoughts I'd shoved aside for the past forty-eight hours, just to get through leaving. Just to get here. My parents, leaving San Diego and my friends, that ridiculous airplane ride into Healy. Macy's expectations for our friendship, the way Jaxon looked at me and then *didn't* look at me, the things he said to me. The ridiculous amount of clothes I have to wear here to keep warm. The fact that I'm essentially trapped in this castle by the cold...

It all kind of melds together into one great big carousel of fear and regret, whirling through my brain. No thoughts are clear, no images stand out from any of the others—only an overwhelming feeling of impending doom.

The last time I freaked out like this, Heather's mom told me that experiencing too powerful emotions is completely normal after a huge loss. The crushing weight on my chest, the swirling thoughts, the shaking hands, the feeling that the world is going to come crashing in on me—all completely normal. She's a therapist, so she should know, but it doesn't feel normal right now.

It feels terrifying.

I know I should stay where I am—this castle is gigantic, and I have no idea where anything is—but I’m smart enough to know if I stay here staring at the ceiling, I’m going to end up having a full-blown panic attack. So instead, I take a deep breath and heave myself out of bed. I slip my feet into my shoes and grab my hoodie on my way out the door.

Back home, I’d go for a run when I couldn’t sleep, even if it was three in the morning. But here, that’s out of the question. Not just because it’s as cold as death outside but because God only knows what wild animal is waiting for me in the middle of the night. I haven’t been lying in bed listening to the roars and howls for the last half an hour for nothing.

But it’s a big castle with long hallways. I may not be able to run through them, but I can at least go exploring for a while. See what I find.

I carefully close the door behind me—the last thing I want to do is wake Macy up when she’s been so nice to me—then head down the hallway toward the stairs.

It’s creepier than I expect it to be. I would have thought the hallways would be lit up in the middle of the night, safety protocols and all that, but instead they’re dim. Like *just enough light to see imaginary shadows sweeping along the corridors* dim.

For a second, I think about going back into my room and forgetting about the whole walk/explore-the-castle thing. But just the thought has the merry-go-round starting in my brain again, and that’s the last thing I can handle right now.

I pull out my phone and angle its flashlight down the hall. Suddenly the shadows disappear, and it looks like any other hallway. If you discount the rough stone walls and old-fashioned tapestries, I mean.

I have no idea where I’m going, only that I want to get off the

dorm oor. I can barely stand the thought of dealing with *Macy* right now—dealing with anyone else seems blatantly impossible.

I make it to the long, circular staircase without a problem and take the steps two at a time, all the way down to the ground oor. After my shower last night, *Macy* mentioned that's where the cafeteria is, along with a number of the classrooms. There are other classrooms in buildings around the grounds, but most of the core classes are taught here, inside the castle, which I am all for. The less I have to be out in that weather, the better.

Down here, the hallways are lined with more tapestries, worn and faded with age. My favorite stretches for yards and is vividly colorful. Purples and pinks, greens and yellows, all woven together with no apparent rhyme or reason—except as I step back and shine my flashlight on a wider swath of it, I realize there *is* a pattern. This is an artistic rendering of the aurora borealis—the northern lights.

I've always wanted to see them, and somehow, in all the pain and worry about moving to Alaska, I totally forgot that I'll pretty much have a front-row seat out here.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me walking back toward the entryway and the giant set of double doors that lead to the front courtyard. I'm not foolish enough to go traipsing around in the snow in my hoodie and pajama bottoms, but maybe I can stick my head out, see if I can find any lights in the sky.

It's probably a bad idea—I should just head back up to bed and save the aurora borealis for another night—but now that it's in my brain, I can't shake it. My dad used to tell me stories about the northern lights, and they've always been a bucket list item for me. Now that I'm this close, I can't *not* take a look.

I use my flashlight to negotiate my way back down the hall. Once there, I hold it up so I can unlock the doors, but before I can do more than locate the first one, both doors fly open. And

in walk two guys wearing nothing but old-school concert T-shirts, jeans, and lace-up boots. No jackets, no sweaters, no hoodies, even. Just ripped jeans, Mötley Crüe, and Timberlands. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen, and for a second, I can't help wondering if this castle—like Hogwarts—comes equipped with its very own ghosts. Ones who died at an eighties rock concert.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we made it back just in time," says the taller of the two guys. He's got warm copper skin, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and a black nose ring right through his septum. "What are you doing out of bed, Grace?"

Something in his voice has nervous goose bumps prickling along my skin. "How do you know my name?"

He laughs. "You're the new girl, aren't you? Everybody knows *your* name. *Grace*." He takes a step closer, and I would swear he was sniffing me, which is completely bizarre. And also not ghostlike behavior at all. "Now, how about you answer my question? What are you doing out of bed?"

I don't tell him about the northern lights—especially since I get a glimpse of the sky before he closes the door and it's just the regular black sprinkled with stars you can see almost anywhere in the world. Just one more disappointment in a long string of them lately.

"I was thirsty," I lie badly, wrapping my arms around my waist in an effort to combat the cold gust of wind that came in with them and still lingers in the air around us. "Just wanted to get some water."

"And did you find any?" says the second guy. He's shorter than the first and stockier, too. His blond hair is shaved close against his scalp.

It seems like an innocuous enough question, except he's walking toward me as he asks it, getting into my personal space until I have to decide whether to stand my ground or back up.

I decide to back up, mostly because I don't like the way he's looking at me. And because each step I take gets me closer to the stairs and—hopefully—my room.

"I did, thanks," I lie again, trying to sound unconcerned. "I'm just going to head back to bed now."

"Before we even have a chance to get to know you? That doesn't seem very polite, does it, Marc?" the short-haired one asks.

"It doesn't, no," Marc answers, and now he's really close, too. "Especially since Foster's been up our asses about you for weeks now."

"What does that mean?" I demand, forgetting to be afraid for a second.

"It means we've had three different meetings about you, all warning us to be on our best behavior. It's annoying as hell. Right, Quinn?"

"Absolutely. If he's that worried about you being here, I don't know why he didn't just leave you wherever you came from." Quinn reaches out, yanks one of my curls—hard. I want to pull away, want to shove him back and yell at him to leave me alone.

But there's trouble here. I can feel it, just like I can feel the barely leashed violence rolling off these guys in waves. It's like they're desperate to hurt someone, desperate to rip someone apart. I don't want that someone to be me.

"What do you think, Grace?" Marc sneers. "You think you can handle Alaska? Because I'm pretty sure it's going to naturally unselect you pretty damn quick."

"I'm just...trying to get by until graduation. I don't want any trouble." I can barely force the words out of my tight throat.

"Trouble?" Quinn laughs, but the sound is completely devoid of humor. "Do we look like trouble to you?"

They look like the very definition of trouble.

Like, if I looked trouble up in the dictionary, their pictures would be right there, front and center, along with a giant warning stamp. I don't say that, though. I don't say anything, actually, as my brain races to figure a way out of this terrifying situation. Part of me thinks I must be dreaming, because this feels like a scene out of every teen movie ever, where the school bullies decide to gang up on the new kid just to show her who's boss.

But this is real life, not the movies, and I have no delusions that I'm the boss out here or anywhere. I want to tell them that, but right now answering feels like acquiescence, and that's the last thing you're supposed to do when dealing with a bully. The more you give them, the more they try to take.

"So tell me, Grace. Have you had a chance to see the snow yet?" Marc asks, and suddenly he's way too close for comfort. "I bet you've never even seen snow before."

"I saw plenty of snow on the way up here."

"On the back of a snowmobile? That doesn't count, does it, Quinn?"

"No." Quinn shakes his head with a snarl that shows an awful lot of teeth. "You definitely need to get closer. Show us what you can do."

"What I can do?" I have no idea what they're talking about.

"I mean, it's obvious you've got *something* going on." This time, when he breathes in, I'm sure Marc is smelling me. "I just can't quite figure out what it is, yet."

"Right?" Quinn agrees. "Me neither, but there's definitely something there. So let's see what you've got, *Grace*."

He shifts, braces himself, and that's when it hits me. What they're planning on doing. And just how much danger I'm really in.

7

Something Really Freaking Wicked This Way Comes

I whirl around, adrenaline pumping, and make a break for the stairs. But Marc reaches out and grabs me before I make it more than a few feet. He yanks me hard against him—my back to his front—and wraps his arms around me as I start to struggle in earnest.

“Let me go!” I shout, bringing my heel back to kick him in the knees. But I don’t have much leverage, and he doesn’t so much as wince.

I think about stomping on his feet, but my Converse aren’t going to do much damage to his boots, let alone his feet inside them. “Let me go or I’ll scream!” I tell him, trying—and failing—not to sound scared.

“Go ahead,” he tells me as he wrestles me toward the front door Quinn is conveniently holding open for him. “No one will care.”

I throw my head back, slam it against his chin, and he curses, jerks one of his arms up to try to hold my head in place. Which infuriates me as much as it terrifies me. Bending down, I bite his arm as hard as I can.

He yelps and jerks, and his forearm slams against my mouth.

It hurts, has the metallic taste of blood pooling in my mouth. Which only pisses me off more.

“Stop!” I shout, bucking and kicking against him as hard as I can. I can’t let them get me out the door; I *can’t*. I’m dressed in nothing but a hoodie and a pair of eece pants, and it’s no more than ten degrees out there. With my thin California blood, I won’t last more than fteen minutes without getting frostbite or hypothermia—if I’m lucky.

But he still doesn’t let go, his arms like bands of steel around me.

“Get your hands off me!” I yell, this time not caring who I wake up. In fact, hoping that I wake up someone. Anyone. Everyone. At the same time, I slam my head back with as much force as I can, aiming to break his nose.

I must hit something, because he lets me go with a curse. I hit the ground, hard, my legs buckling so that I end up on my knees just in time to see Marc going across the entryway, eyes wide as he slams into the farthest wall.

I don’t have time to think about how that happened, though, because it takes only a second for him to recover, and then he’s charging back across the foyer, straight at me. I turn to ee, sts up in an attempt to ward off Quinn if he tries to stop me, but suddenly he’s ying across the foyer, too. He crashes into a bookshelf instead of a wall, and a vase falls off the top shelf and shatters against his head.

I turn around, looking for a way out, but Marc moves fast—really fast—and suddenly he’s standing there, between the staircase and me. I twist to the right, trying to decide my best bet to get away, and that’s when I run straight into a solid wall of muscle.

Shit. There are three of them now? Panic races through me, and I reach out, try to shove whoever it is backward. But like

Marc, this guy doesn't move. At least not until he wraps his hand around my wrist and tugs me forward hard enough to lift me straight off the ground.

It's as he's pulling me toward him that I get my first good look at his face and realize that it's Jaxon.

I don't know whether I should be relieved or even more afraid.

At least not until he yanks me behind him, putting himself between the others and me as he faces them down.

Mark and Quinn skid to a halt, the uneasiness on their faces turning to fear.

"Is there a problem here?" Jaxon asks. His voice is lower than before and more gravelly. It's also colder than the snowdrifts right outside the front door.

"No problem," Marc says with a forced chuckle. "We were just getting to know the new girl."

"Is that what they call attempted murder these days? Getting to know someone?" He doesn't raise his voice, doesn't do anything the least bit threatening. And still all three of us wince as we wait for the other shoe to drop.

"We wouldn't have hurt her, man," Quinn pipes up for the first time. He sounds a lot whinier than he did a few minutes ago, when it was just them and me. But he's not slurring his words or anything, so I guess the vase must not have done him too much damage. "We were just going to toss her outside for a few minutes."

"Yeah," Marc adds. "It was just a joke. No big deal."

"Is that what you're calling this mess?" Jaxon inquires, and somehow his voice has turned even colder. "You know the rules."

I'm not sure what rules he's talking about—or why he sounds like he's personally in charge of enforcing them—but his words have Quinn and Marc cowering that much more. Not to mention

looking a little sick to their stomachs.

“We’re sorry, Jaxon. We just came in off a run, and things got a little out of hand.”

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.” He half turns, holds out a hand to me.

I shouldn’t take it. Every ounce of self-defense training I’ve ever had says I should run. That I should take the reprieve he—Jaxon—is offering and make a mad dash for my room.

But there’s a look of such intense rage simmering beneath his obsidian gaze, and I instinctively know he’s turned to offer me his hand in an effort to keep the guys from seeing it. I don’t know why; I just know he doesn’t want them to realize how upset he is. Or maybe it’s that he doesn’t want them figuring out how upset he is on my behalf.

Either way, he saved me tonight, and I owe him. I hold his gaze, telling him with a look that I’ll keep his secret.

And then I do what he is silently asking and step forward. I don’t take his hand—that’s a little too much after what he said and did earlier—but I move forward, knowing that Jaxon won’t let Marc or Quinn do anything else to me.

I must get too close for his liking, however, because he shifts himself partially in front of me again, even as he shoots Quinn and Marc a cold look that warns them to behave. The warning might be unnecessary, though, because they’re both looking pretty shamefaced already.

“We’re sorry, Grace.” Marc speaks first. “That was totally uncool of us. We didn’t mean to scare you.”

I don’t say anything, because I’m sure as hell not going to tell them what they did to me was okay. And I’m not brave enough to tell them to go to hell, even with Jaxon acting as my shield. So I do the only thing I can do. I stare stonily at them and will their farce of an apology to be over so I can finally go back to my room.

“Yeah, you know.” Quinn waves a hand at the ceiling. “The moon is doing its thing, so...”

That’s the best they’ve got? *The moon is doing its thing?* I have no idea what that means, and honestly, I don’t care. I’m so over this place and everyone in it. Except Macy and Uncle Finn and—maybe, just maybe—Jaxon.

“I’m going to bed.” I turn to leave, but Jaxon’s hand is back on my wrist.

“Wait.” It’s the first word he’s spoken to me since the whole debacle from earlier, and it halts me in my tracks more surely than his hand around my wrist.

“Why?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he turns back to Marc and Quinn and says, “This isn’t over.”

They nod, but they don’t say anything else. His words must be a dismissal as well as a threat, though, because they take off down the hall, running faster than I’ve ever seen anyone move.

We both watch them go, and then Jaxon turns to me. For long seconds, he doesn’t say anything, just looks me over from head to toe, his dark eyes cataloging every inch of me. Not going to lie. It makes me a little uncomfortable. Not in the same way that Quinn and Marc made me uncomfortable, like they were looking for a weakness to exploit. It’s more a wow, did it suddenly get hot in here and why oh why am I wearing my oldest, most raggedy pair of pajama bottoms kind of uncomfortable.

Too bad I have no idea how I feel about feeling like that.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly, his fingers finally releasing their hold on my wrist.

“I’m fine,” I answer, even though I’m not sure it’s true. What kind of place is this where people try to shove you outside to die as a *prank*?

“You don’t look fine.”

That stings a little, even though I know he's not wrong. "Yeah, well, it's been a crappy couple of days."

"I bet." His eyes are serious as he looks at me, his expression grave. "You don't have to worry about Marc and Quinn. They won't bother you again." The *I'll make sure of it* part of that statement goes unspoken, but I hear it all the same.

"Thank you," I blurt out. "For helping me, I mean. I appreciate it."

His brows go up and, if possible, his eyes go even darker in the dim light. "Is that what you think I did?"

"Isn't it?"

He shakes his head, gives a little laugh that has my heart stuttering in my chest. "You have no idea, do you?"

"No idea of what?"

"That I just made you a pawn in a game you can't begin to understand."

"You think this is a game?" I ask, incredulous.

"I know exactly what this is. Do you?"

I wait for him to say something else, to explain his cryptic comments, but he doesn't. Instead, he just stares at me until I can't help but squirm a little. I've never had anyone look at me the way he is right now, like he can't decide if he made a mistake rescuing me from imminent death.

Or maybe it's just that he can't decide what to say next. In which case, join the freaking club.

In the end, though, all that brooding silence is for nothing, because he simply says, "You're bleeding."

"I am?" My hand goes to my cheek, which aches from where Marc's shoulder banged into it when I was trying to get away from him.

"Not there." He lifts his hand to my mouth and gently—so gently I can barely feel him—brushes his thumb across my lower

lip. “Here.” He holds his thumb up, and in the dim light, I can just see the smear of blood glistening on his skin.

“Oh, gross!” I reach to wipe away the blood. “Let me—”

He laughs, cutting me off. Then brings his thumb to his lips and—holding my gaze with his own—sticks his thumb in his mouth and slowly sucks off the blood.

It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, and I don’t even know why. I mean, shouldn’t this be totally creeping me out?

Maybe it’s the way his eyes heat up the second he tastes my blood.

Maybe it’s the little noise he makes as he swallows.

Or maybe it’s the fact that that swipe of his thumb across my lips, followed by that lift of it to his own lips feels more intimate than any kiss I’ve ever shared with another boy.

“You should go.” The words sound like they’re being torn out of him.

“Now?”

“Yeah, now.” His expression feels intentionally vacant. Like he’s trying too hard not to share with me what he’s really thinking. Or feeling. “And I strongly suggest that after midnight, you stay in your room where you belong.”

“Stay in my—” I bristle at what he’s implying. “Are you saying I’m responsible for what happened tonight?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’m not. They should both have better control.”

It’s a weird way of saying they shouldn’t go around trying to murder people, and I start to ask him about it. But he continues before I can figure out how to phrase it. “But I warned you before that you need to be careful here. This isn’t like your old high school.”

“How do you know what my old high school was like?”

“I don’t,” he says with a smirk. “But I can guarantee it’s

nothing like Katmere Academy.”

Jaxon’s right—of course he’s right—but I’m not about to back down now. “You don’t know that.”

He leans forward then, as if he can’t help himself, until his face, and his lips, are barely an inch from mine. And just like earlier, I know it should make me uncomfortable. But it doesn’t. It just makes me burn. And this time, when my knees shake, it has nothing to do with fear.

My lips part, my breath hitches in my chest, my heart beats faster. He feels it—I can see it in his blown-out pupils, in the way he goes wary and watchful. Can hear it in the sudden harshness of his own breath, sense it in the slight tremble of his body against my own. For a second, just a second, I think he’s going to kiss me. But then he leans in farther, past my mouth, until his lips are all but pressed up against my ear. And I get the strange sense that he’s smelling me just like Marc and Quinn had, although it has an entirely different effect on me.

“You have no idea what I know,” he says softly.

The warmth of his breath has me gasping, melting, my whole body sagging against his of its own volition.

He lets it happen for one second, two, his hands on my waist, his shoulders curving down and into me. And then, just as suddenly, he’s gone, stepping back so fast, I nearly fall without the support of his body.

“You need to go,” he repeats, voice even lower, rougher than before.

“Now?” I demand, incredulous.

“Right now.” He nods to the staircase, and somehow I find myself moving toward it, though I never make a conscious decision to do so. “Go straight to your room and lock the door.”

“I thought you said I don’t have to worry about Marc or Quinn anymore?” I ask over my shoulder.

“You don’t.”

“Well then, why do I need to—?” I break off when I realize that I’m talking to myself. Because again, Jaxon is gone.

And I’m left wondering when I’ll see him again. And why it matters so much that I do.

Live and Let Die

Not going to lie. I'm a little shell-shocked when I finally make it back to my room. It's nearly five a.m., and the last thing I want to do is crawl back into bed and stare at the ceiling until Macy wakes up. But it's not like I feel safe wandering the school anymore, either, considering I could be dead by now if Jaxon hadn't shown up when he did.

And since the last thing I can do—and the last thing I want to do—is count on him to save me if I end up in another bizarre situation like that, I think my best bet is to hang in my room until Macy wakes up and I can get her opinion on what just happened. Although, if her opinion is anything other than OMG, WTF?!?! I'm taking my unpacked suitcases and heading back to San Diego. Freeloading off Heather's family for the next eight months is better than dying. Or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Especially since I don't get altitude sickness in San Diego.

The nausea hits me as I'm tiptoeing across the room, and I barely make it back to my bed with a soft groan.

Macy must have heard me because she tells me, "I promise the altitude sickness won't last forever."

“It’s not just the altitude sickness. It’s everything.”

“I bet,” is all she says, and silence stretches between us. I’m pretty sure it’s because she’s giving me the space to sort through my thoughts and decide if I want to share any.

I stare at the gray stone ceiling above my bed pressing down on me, then take a deep breath. “It’s just... Alaska’s like a foreign planet, you know? Like everything about this place is so different than home that it’s hard to get used to it.” Normally I don’t dump my stuff on people I don’t know really well—it’s easier to just keep everything inside—but Macy is the closest friend I have here. And there’s a part of me that feels like I’ll explode if I don’t talk to someone.

“I totally get that. I’ve lived here my whole life, and some days it feels bizarre to me, too. But you’ve only been in the state about twelve hours, and you’ve been feeling gross for most of those. Why don’t you give it a few days, wait till the altitude sickness wears off and you’ve gone to a couple classes? Maybe things won’t seem as strange once you get into a routine.”

“I know you’re right. And I wasn’t even feeling that terrible about things when I woke up, until—” I break off, trying to think of the best way to tell her about what just happened.

“Until what?” She throws back her covers and climbs out of bed.

“I know it’s a pretty big school, but do you know two guys named Marc and Quinn?” I ask.

“That depends. Does one of them have a septum piercing?”

“Yes. It’s a big black ring.” I hold my fingers to my nose to demonstrate.

“Then yeah, I know them. They’re juniors like me. And good guys, really funny. In fact, there was this one time—” I must not have a poker face, because she stops abruptly. Narrows her eyes. “Then again, I’m beginning to think the question I should be

asking is how do *you* know them?”

“Maybe they were just fooling around, but...I’m pretty sure they tried to kill me tonight. Or at least scare me to death.”

“They tried to *what*?” she squawks, nearly dropping the bottle of water she had gotten out of the fridge for me. “Tell me what happened right now. And don’t leave *anything* out.”

She seems adamant, so I faithfully recite the events until I get to the point where Jaxon saved me. I’m not sure how I feel about that—or how I feel about him—and I’m not quite ready to talk about it yet. And I’m certainly not ready to listen to Macy talk about it. Plus, I’d sort of silently agreed to keep something about the interaction a secret, although admittedly now, back in my room, I wonder if I’d imagined that silent exchange or not.

“So what happened?” she asks when I don’t say anything else. “How did you get away from them?”

“Someone heard the fight and came to investigate. Once the boys realized there was a witness, they chilled out pretty quickly.”

“I bet they did, the jerks. The last thing they’d want is to be reported to my dad. But they should have thought of that before they put their hands on you. I swear, I’m going to murder them myself.”

She looks, and sounds, mad enough to do just that even before she continues. “What were they thinking? They don’t even know you, so why do this?” She gets up, starts pacing. “You totally could have gotten hypothermia if they’d left you outside for too long, let alone what could have happened if they’d kept you out there more than ten minutes. You seriously could have died. Which makes no sense. They’re always a little wild, super high energy. But I’ve never seen them be malicious before.”

“The whole thing doesn’t make sense. I’m beginning to think they were high or something, because there’s no other explanation as to why they would have been outside in only jeans

and T-shirts. I mean, how did *they* avoid getting hypothermia?”

“I don’t know,” Macy says. But she looks uncomfortable, like maybe she knows for a fact that they do drugs. Or like she thinks I’m delusional for even suggesting that they were outside without any protective clothing on. But I know what I saw. Those two guys were definitely not wearing any kind of cold-weather gear.

“Maybe they were only outside for a minute or two,” she suggests eventually, handing me two Advil. “Either way, whatever’s going on with them, I’m sure my father will figure it out.”

There’s a part of me that wants to ask her not to tell Uncle Finn, because it’s hard enough being the new girl without also being a snitch. But every time I think about what might have happened—what *would* have happened if Jaxon hadn’t come along—I know Uncle Finn has to be told. Otherwise, what’s to stop them from doing it again to somebody else?

“In the meantime, you probably need to get some more sleep. Unless you’re hungry?”

Since just the thought of food has my stomach spinning in protest, I tell her, “I think I’m going to pass on that. But I’m not sure I can sleep, either. Maybe I should unpack my suitcases, get stuff ready for tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry about your suitcases. I already did them.”

“You did? When?”

“After you fell asleep last night. I figured if you didn’t like where I put things, you could change it. But at least this way, all your stuff is within easy reach.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Macy.”

“I know I didn’t have to. But you’re not feeling great, so I figured a little help couldn’t hurt. Besides, we have a party to go to this evening and you need to be able to find your makeup and hair stuff.”

I'm not sure what amuses me more, the way Macy just casually drops in the fact that she expects me to attend a party with her today or the fact that she actually expects me to wear makeup to it, when mascara and a couple of tubes of lip gloss are pretty much all I own.

Considering she had a full face of makeup on yesterday when she was riding a snowmobile through the Alaskan wilderness, I can only imagine what her party look will be.

"So what kind of party is this exactly?" I ask as I curl up under the hot-pink comforter that is rapidly growing on me—maybe because it's the softest, most comfortable one I've ever owned.

"It's a welcome to Katmere Academy party—for you."

"What?" I sit up so fast that my head starts to throb all over again. "A welcome party? For me? Are you *serious*?"

"Well, to be fair, the school hosts a kind of high tea one afternoon a month to promote student unity. We just decided to make today's tea a little more festive in your honor."

"Oh, yes. Because the students have all been *so* welcoming so far." I bury my face in my pillow and groan.

"I swear we're not all bad. Look at Flint. He's great, right?"

"He really was." I can't help smiling as I think of the way he teased me, called me New Girl.

"Most of the people you meet here are going to be like him, not like Marc and Quinn. I promise." She sighs. "But I can cancel if you want. Tell everybody that your altitude sickness is too bad. Which, at the rate you're going, might not even be a lie."

She's trying so hard not to sound disappointed, but I can hear it, even with a pillow over my face.

"No, don't cancel," I tell her. "As long as I'm not puking, I'll go."

I've got to face these prep school kids en masse sooner or later. Might as well get it over with today when they're all under

adult supervision and presumably on their best behavior. So much less chance of me being tossed into the snow or out a window that way... I shiver. Too soon for that joke.

“Awesome!” She pops down on the bed beside me, holds out the water bottle she’d given me earlier. “Don’t forget, water is your friend right now,” she says with a wink.

“I don’t want to,” I whine playfully.

“Yeah, well, I’d do it anyway. Altitude sickness requires lots and lots of hydration. I mean, if you don’t want to get pulmonary or cerebral edema, which, you know, could kill you almost as fast as hypothermia.”

“Seriously?” I roll my eyes at her, but I take the bottle of water and drink half of it in one go. “Has anyone ever told you you’re a lot tougher than you look?”

“My boyfriend. But I think he secretly likes it.”

“Good for him.” I take another long swallow of water. “Do you have Net ix?”

“Are you kidding?” She gives me a look. “I live on a mountain in the middle of Alaska. I’d die without Net ix.”

“Point taken. How about *Legacies*? My best friend, Heather, and I just started watching it last week.”

Macy’s eyes go huge. “*Legacies*?”

“Yeah. It’s this really cool show about a bunch of teenage vampires, witches, and werewolves all living together at a boarding school. I know it sounds a little silly, but it’s fun to imagine.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all,” Macy says with a cough. “And count me in. I mean, who can resist a hot vampire?”

“My sentiments exactly.”

We start the show back at the first episode so Macy can catch up. And as we watch the main character’s foster brother become a werewolf, I can’t help thinking about what Marc and Quinn

said about the moon. I mean, I know it's just that they needed the brightness of the moon to illuminate the dark wilderness around here.

Of course I know that.

Still, after going two rounds with Jaxon—both of which ended with him warning me off—it's hard not to wonder exactly what I've gotten myself into here.

9

Even Hell Has its Factions

“Stop fidgeting!” Macy tells me several hours later, smacking at my hands as we get ready to head to the party. “You look amazing.”

“Are you sure?” I open my closet door, look in the full-length mirror for at least the tenth time since I got dressed.

“I’m positive. That dress is amazing on you. The color is perfect.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s not the color I’m worried about.”

“So what *are* you worried about?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I tug on the neckline a little, try to pull it up an inch or three. “My boobs falling out, maybe? *So* not the first impression I’m going for here.”

She laughs. “Oh my God. The dress is gorgeous. And you look gorgeous in it.”

“The dress *is* gorgeous,” I agree. Because it is. And it probably looks perfectly respectable on Macy’s tall, willowy figure. My big boobs make things a little trickier, though. “Maybe if I don’t take a deep breath for the whole night, things will be okay.”

“Look, maybe you should wear the jeans you originally planned.” Macy crosses to my bed and holds them up. “I don’t

want you to be uncomfortable.”

It’s tempting, so tempting. But... “Are any of the other girls going to be in jeans?”

“Who cares what the other girls are wearing.”

“I take it that’s a no.” I tug on the neckline one more time, then give up and shut the closet door. “Come on, let’s get going before I decide to stay in and binge-watch *Netfix* for the rest of the evening.”

Macy gives me a hug. “You look really beautiful. So let’s go have fun.”

I roll my eyes at her a second time, because “beautiful” is a bit more than a stretch—with my curly auburn hair, plain brown eyes, and the random groupings of freckles on my nose and cheeks, I’m pretty much the opposite of beautiful.

On a good day, I’m cute. Standing next to Macy, who *is* freaking gorgeous, I’m wallpaper. The bland, boring kind.

“Come on,” she continues, grabbing my forearm and tugging me toward the door. “If we wait much longer, we’re going to be more than fashionably late to your welcome party.”

“We could just skip it altogether,” I say even as I let her pull me out the door. “Be fashionably absent.”

“Too late,” she answers with a deliberately obnoxious grin. “Everyone’s waiting for us.”

“Oh, yay.” Despite the sarcasm, I head out. The sooner we get there, the sooner I’ll get the hard part over with.

But as I start to weave my way through the crystal beads outside our door, Macy says, “Here, let me hold those for you. Don’t want them to shock you. Sorry I didn’t think about that yesterday.”

“*Shock* me? What do you mean?”

“They shock everybody.” She tilts her head to the side, gives me a funny look. “Didn’t you feel it when you went downstairs last night?”

“Um, no.” I reach out and close my fist around several strands of beads, trying to figure out what she’s talking about.

“You really don’t feel anything?” Macy asks after a second.

“I really don’t.” I look down at my favorite pair of rose-tattoo Chucks. “Maybe it’s the shoes.”

“Maybe.” She looks doubtful. “Come on, let’s go.”

She closes the door, then brushes her hands through the beads several times, like she’s *trying* to get shocked. Which, I know, makes absolutely no sense, but that’s definitely what it looks like.

“So,” I ask as she finally gives up on whatever she’s doing. “Why would you deliberately keep a beaded curtain around that builds up static electricity and shocks everyone who comes in contact with it?”

“Not everyone,” she answers with a pointed look. “And because it’s pretty. Obviously.”

“Obviously.”

As we make our way down the hall, I can’t help but notice the crown molding on the walls. Decorated with black shot through with thorny gold flowers, it’s elaborate and beautiful and just a little creepy. Not as creepy as the lights that line the ceiling, however, which look a lot like trios of weeping black flowers connected by crooked, thorny stems. Gold light bulbs hang from the center of the flowers, partially obscured by their downturned petals.

The whole effect is eerie but beautiful and, while I definitely wouldn’t choose to decorate my room like this, I have to admit it’s stunning.

So stunning that I almost don’t notice that, by the time we make it to the second door, my stomach has calmed down. More like the pterodactyls have become butterflies, but I’m not going to complain, considering it’s a definite step up. I’ve still got a

low-grade headache from the altitude, but for now the Advil has everything under control.

I just hope it stays that way.

I know Macy says this is supposed to be a welcome party, but I'm kind of hoping the tea just goes on as usual. My goal is to be as invisible as possible this year, and a party where I'm the main attraction kind of messes with that plan. Or, you know, totally obliterates it.

As we approach the door, I grab Macy's wrist. "You aren't going to make me stand up in front of everyone, are you? We're just going to kind of mingle and walk around, right?"

"Totally. I mean, I think Dad is planning on giving a little welcome speech, but it won't be any big deal."

Of course he is. I mean, why wouldn't he? After all, who doesn't think painting a target on the new girl's back is a good idea? FML.

"Hey, don't look so worried." Macy stops in front of an ornately carved set of double doors and throws her arms around me. "Everything is going to be okay. I swear."

"I'm willing to settle for *not catastrophic*," I tell her, but even as I say it, I'm not holding my breath. Not when it feels like there's a weight pressing down on me. Making me smaller. Turning me into nothing.

It's not the school's fault—I've felt like this for the last month. Still, being here in this place—in Alaska—somehow makes it all worse.

"You'll settle for *amazing*," she corrects as she grabs my arm and wraps hers through it. Then she's leaning forward, sending the double doors flying in both directions as she walks in like she owns the place.

And maybe she does. From the way everyone in the room turns to look at her, I can believe it. At least until I realize my

worst nightmares have come true and they're all looking at me. And none of them seem impressed.

So I decide to focus on the décor instead, which is amazing. I don't know where to look first, so I look everywhere, taking in the crimson and black velvet baroque wallpaper, the three-tiered iron chandeliers with black crystals dripping from each elaborately carved arm, the fancy red chairs and black cloth-covered tables that take up the back half of the large room.

Every five feet or so, there are dark wall sconces with what look like actual lit candles in them. I step closer to check them out and find myself completely charmed by the fact that each wall sconce is carved into the shape of a different dragon. One with its wings spread wide in front of a fancy Celtic cross, another curled up around the top of a castle, a third obviously in mid-flight. In all the dragons, the candle flame is lined up to flicker in their wide-open mouths, and as I get even closer, I realize that yes, the flame is real.

I can't imagine how my uncle gets away with that—no fire marshal in the country would be okay with letting a school have unattended candles around students. Then again, this is the middle of nowhere, Alaska, and I also can't imagine a fire marshal actually paying Katmere an unscheduled visit.

Macy tugs at my arm, and reluctantly I let her pull me away from the dragons and farther into the room. That's when I glance up and realize the ceiling is also painted red, with more of that black molding lining the top edges of the walls.

"Are you going to spend the entire party staring at the decor?" Macy teases in a low whisper.

"Maybe." Reluctantly, I take my eyes off the ceiling and focus them on the large buffet tables that run the length of the front wall, loaded down with cheese trays, pastries, sandwiches, and drinks.

No one is at the buffet table, though, and almost no one is seated at the other tables, either. Instead, students are grouped together in various areas of the room. This self-imposed isolation might be the only thing here that feels familiar. Guess it doesn't matter if you go to a regular high school in San Diego or a high-end boarding school in Alaska—cliques are everywhere.

And apparently—if you are at a high-end boarding school—those cliques are about a thousand times snobbier-looking and more unapproachable than normal.

Lucky, lucky me.

As Macy and I step farther into the room, I find myself eyeing the different...factions, for lack of a better word.

Energy—and disdain—permeate the air around the students near the window as they look me over. There are about thirty-five of them, and they're all huddled into one large group, like a team going over plays right before they take the field. The guys are all wearing jeans and the girls are in tiny little dresses, both of which show off strong, powerful bodies with some major muscle definition.

Curiosity and a healthy dose of contempt cover the faces of my new classmates at the back of the room. Dressed mostly in long, flowing dresses or button-up shirts in luxurious patterns and fabrics that fit the room perfectly, they're a lot more delicate-looking than the group near the windows, and even before Macy waves excitedly at them, I know that this is her group.

She starts moving toward them, and I follow, disguising my sudden nervousness with a smile I'm far from feeling.

On our way, we pass another large clump of students, and I swear I can feel heat radiating from them in waves. Every single person in this group is tall—even the girls are close to six feet—and the fact that they're watching me with varying degrees of scorn and suspicion makes walking past them distinctly

uncomfortable. Basketball, anyone?

At least until I see Flint in the center of the group, grinning and wiggling his eyebrows at me so wildly that I can't help but giggle. Like every other guy in his group, he's dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt that shows off his chest and biceps. He looks good. Really good. Then again, so do most of his friends. He sticks his tongue out at me right before I turn away, and this time I full-on laugh.

"What's funny?" Macy demands, but then she sees Flint and just rolls her eyes. "You know how long I spent trying to get his attention—and being totally ignored—before I gave up? If we weren't cousins who are also destined to be best friends, I would resent you."

"Pretty sure Flint and I are destined to be friends, too," I tell her as I hustle to keep up with her ridiculously long stride. "I don't think guys cross their eyes like that at girls they're interested in."

"Yeah, well, you never know. Dra—" She breaks off on a violent cough, like she's just choked on her own saliva or something.

"You okay?" I pat her back a little.

"I'm fine." She coughs again, looks a little nervous as she tugs at one of her puffy sleeves. "Drastic."

"Drastic?" I repeat, more than a little puzzled at this point.

"In case you were wondering." She shoots me an assessing look. "Before. I was going to say drastic. Like, sometimes guys go to drastic measures to get girls they like to notice them. That's what I was going to say. *Drastic*."

"Ooooookay." I don't say anything else because now I'm just confused. Not so much by what she's saying as by how emphatic she's being. Then again, she got weird around Flint yesterday, too. Maybe it's being this close to him that turns her all tongue-tied.

Macy doesn't say anything else as we finally make it to the center of the huge, ornately decorated room. Not that I blame her, because the group we're passing now is filled with the most intimidating people in the place—by far. And that's saying something, considering nearly everyone in this room is unnerving as fuck.

But these people take it to a whole new level. Dressed entirely in monochromatic shades of black or white—designer shirts, dresses, trousers, shoes, *jewelry*—they all but drip money...along with a careless kind of power that it's impossible to miss. Though they are as obvious a clique as any of the others in the room, there's a kind of formality among them that the other groups lack, a sense that they have one another's backs against anyone else in the room but that the alliance ends there.

As we walk by them, I realize there is another big difference between the other groups and them. Not one of them has so much as glanced my way.

I can't help being grateful for that fact, considering my knees wobble a little more with each step I take toward Macy's friends. I'm completely overwhelmed—not just by the number of people at the party who are looking at me but by how ridiculously tight most of the groups are. Like, seriously, there's zero crossover—no guy dressed all in black hanging with a girl in a long, flowy dress. No super-tall girl making eyes at one of the sporty-looking guys, or girls, near the window.

No, everyone here at Katmere Academy seems to be staying firmly in their own lanes. And judging by the looks on their faces, it's not fear keeping them there. It's disdain for everyone else in the room.

Fun times. Seriously. I mean, I've always known prep schools are exclusive and snobby—who doesn't? But I wasn't expecting it to this degree. How much money, status, and attitude can one

group of people have, anyway?

Guess it's a good thing I'm related to the headmaster or I'd never make the cut. Nepotism for the win...or loss, depending on how this little soiree goes.

I can't imagine *why* I was nervous to come to this thing...

Only pride keeps me from seeing as we get close to her friends. Well, that and the fact that acting like prey right now seems like a particularly bad idea. I mean, if I don't want to spend the rest of my senior year dodging every mean girl in the place.

"I can't wait for you to meet my friends," Macy tells me as we finally reach the group in the back. Up close, they're even more spectacular, different gemstones gleaming in their hair and against their skin. Earrings, pendants, hair clips, plus eyebrow, lip, and nose rings, all bedecked with colorful stones.

I've never felt plainer in my life, and it takes every ounce of self-control I have not to once again tug on the neckline of my borrowed dress.

"Hey, guys! This is my cousin, Gr—"

"Grace!" a beautiful redhead with a giant amethyst pendant interrupts. "Welcome to Katmere! We've heard soooo much about you." Her voice is enthusiastic to the point of being mocking, but I'm not sure who she's making fun of—Macy or me. At least until I look into her eyes, which are viciously cold—and focused entirely on me.

Big surprise.

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to answer her—being polite is one thing. Participating while she makes fun of me is something else entirely. Thankfully, before I can decide what to do, a girl with thick, curly dark hair and perfect cupid's bow lips does it for me.

"Knock it off, Simone," she tells her before turning to me with what appears (I hope) to be a genuine smile. "Hi, Grace. I'm Lily."

Her soft brown eyes seem friendly and her black hair is worn in locks woven through with sparkling ribbons that beautifully frame her rich brown skin. “And that’s Gwen.”

She nods toward an East Asian girl in a beautiful purple dress who grins and says, “It really is nice to meet you.”

“Um, it’s nice to meet you, too.” I’m trying, I really am. But my tone must sound as doubtful as the rest of me feels, because her eyes grow cloudy.

“Don’t pay any attention to Simone,” she says, all but hissing the redhead’s name. “She’s just bitter because all the guys are looking at you. She doesn’t like the competition.”

“Oh, I’m not—” I break off as Simone snorts.

“Yeah, that’s totally why I’m bitter. I’m worried about the competition. It has nothing to do with the fact that Foster brought a—”

“Why don’t we go get something to drink?” Macy interrupts her loudly.

I start to tell her I’m not thirsty—the low-grade nausea is back—but she doesn’t wait for my answer before she slips her hand in mine and draws me across the room to the buffet tables.

At one end, there are two huge teapots and an arrangement of teacups along with two open coolers filled with icy water bottles and cans of soda.

I start to reach for a cup—I’ve been freezing since I first landed in this state. But then I notice several orange and white five-gallon sports thermoses set up on a separate table. “What are those?” I ask, because I’m curious. And because there seem to be an awful lot of drinks for the number of people in this room. I really, really hope this doesn’t mean that a bunch more students are going to be showing up. We’re already over my comfort level with the number who are already here.

“Oh, those are just water,” Macy says breezily. “We always

keep a bunch on hand in case the temperature drops suddenly and the pipes freeze. Better safe than sorry.”

It seems to me that they’d have special pipes and extra insulation for places in Alaska to make sure that doesn’t happen. But what do I know? I mean, it’s only November and it’s already below freezing outside. And that’s *normal*. It makes sense that a particularly harsh winter could really mess things up here.

Before I can ask anything else, Macy bends down, pulls a Dr Pepper out of the cooler, and holds it out to me. “I made sure Dad told them to order Dr Pepper for the party—and the cafeteria. It’s still your favorite, right?”

It is my favorite. I thought I was in the mood for tea, but there’s something about that maroon can that gets to me. That reminds me of home and my parents and the life I used to have. Homesickness wells up inside me, and I take the drink, desperate for something—anything—familiar.

Macy smiles at me, nods encouragingly, and I realize that she knows what I’m feeling. Gratitude helps chase away the homesickness. “Thanks. That’s really cool of you.”

“It’s nothing.” She knocks her shoulder against mine. “So, who do you want to meet next?” She nods to two guys lounging in red velvet armchairs near the back of the room. They’re dressed in the richly patterned button-ups that mark them as members of Macy’s group. “That’s Cam and his best friend.”

“Cam?” She said the name as though I should recognize it, but I don’t.

“My boyfriend. He’s been dying to meet you. Come on.”

Pretty hard to say no to that, so I don’t even try, though I know Cam and anyone else who is “dying to meet” the new girl are destined to be disappointed. I’m just not that interesting.

“Cam! This is the cousin I was telling you about!” Macy squeals before we even get next to her boyfriend.

He stands and holds out a hand. “Grace, right?”

“Yes.” I shake his hand, and as I do, I can’t help noticing how pasty his skin is. “It’s good to meet you.”

“Good to meet you, too. Macy’s been talking about you coming for weeks now.” He grins at me. “Hope you like snow, surfer girl.”

I don’t bother to tell him that I’m not much of a surfer. God knows I’m guilty of stereotyping, too—before I got here, I was half certain I’d be living in an igloo.

“I don’t know if I do or not,” I tell him. “Yesterday was the first time I’ve ever seen it.”

That gets his attention—and his friend’s, too. “You’ve *never* seen snow?” the other guy asks incredulously. “Ever?”

“Nope.”

“She’s from San Diego, James.” Macy looks, and sounds, exasperated. “Is that really so hard to believe?”

“I guess not.” He shrugs and sends me a grin that I can tell is meant to be charming but grossly misses the mark. I’ve always hated guys who look at girls like they’re food meant to be gobbled up. “Hi, Grace.”

He doesn’t extend his hand, and I definitely don’t extend mine. “Hi.”

“So what do you think of Alaska so far?” Cam asks as he loops an arm around Macy’s waist. He doesn’t wait for an answer before he sits back down, pulling my cousin onto his lap as he does.

Before I can answer, he’s got his face buried in Macy’s neck and she’s giggling, her hands threading their way through his sleek brown hair as she burrows into him.

Which is pretty much my cue to leave, as things suddenly get really awkward. Especially since James continues to stare at me like he’s waiting to see if I’m going to plop myself down on *his* lap—which, for the record, I most definitely am not.

“I, uh, need another drink,” I tell him, awkwardly holding up my still mostly full can of Dr Pepper.

“I can get it for you,” he offers, starting forward, but I take a big step back.

“You don’t have to.”

“You okay, Grace?” Macy breaks off her giggling long enough to ask, completely serious.

“Yeah, of course. I’m fine. I’m just—” Once again, I hold up my Dr Pepper. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Cam must do something super sexy to her, because Macy’s laugh changes, gets lower, about the same time I lose all her attention.

I don’t wait for James to offer again—or worse, insist. Instead, I take off across the room like a shot. But I barely make it to the drinks table before two very large, very warm hands land on my shoulders.

Turns Out the Devil Wears Gucci

I freeze, my heart running wild as *NotJames NotJames NotJames* runs through my head like a mantra on overdrive. I mean, seriously. Don't I have enough on my plate right now? Do I really need some jerk trying to make me his afternoon snack as well?

But before I can figure out what to say, the guy leans forward and—in a low, rich voice—asks, “Want a piggyback ride?”

And just like that, the tension dissolves, leaving nothing but a cautious joy in its place. “Flint!” I whirl around to find him grinning at me, amber eyes dancing wickedly.

“Hey there, New Girl,” he drawls. “Having fun?”

“Absolutely.” I hold up my Dr Pepper. “Doesn't it look like I'm having a good time?”

“It looks like someone can't take a hint, so I thought I'd lend a hand.” As one, we shift to watch James—who, as it turns out, did follow me to the drink table—sulkily make his way back to Cam and Macy, who are still wrapped up in each other.

“Thanks for that. I appreciate it.”

“Gratitude is so last year.” He says it in a fake, high-pitched voice that sounds remarkably like every mean girl everywhere.

The voice, along with the ridiculous hand gesture he uses to accompany it, has me laughing so hard, I nearly snort. And that's when I realize that half the room is still staring at me—while the other half is very deliberately *not* staring at me. Their disregard would be a relief *if* I didn't know they were doing it to make sure I understand how insignificant I really am to them.

Which, duh.

“So do you want to grab something to eat?” Flint asks, nodding behind us.

Before I can answer, both of the room's heavy wooden doors y open. They slam against the wall with a *bang* that makes everyone in the room jump. And then turn to look.

On the plus side, that means no one is paying attention to me anymore. Because they're all looking at him. At *Jaxon*. And really, who could blame them when he walks in like he owns the place—and everybody in it.

Dressed all in Gucci black—silk V-neck sweater, wool pinstripe pants, shiny leather dress shoes—with his scarred eyebrow furrowed and his dark gaze as cold as the snow-covered ground outside, he shouldn't look sexy at all. But he does. God, he really, really does.

On the negative side, all that coldness—all that darkness—is focused directly on me. And Flint, whose arm has somehow found its way around my shoulders.

I try to glance away, but it's impossible. Try not to look Jaxon in the eyes. But he's just as captivating—just as mesmerizing—today as he was last night. And that's before he starts to move, all languid grace, all rolling shoulders and leading hips and legs that go on for freaking ever.

It's overwhelming.

He's overwhelming.

He's just a guy, I remind myself even as my mouth turns

desert dry. *Just a regular guy like everyone else here.* But even as I tell myself that, I know it's a lie. Jaxon is anything but regular. Anything but ordinary, even here, among the blatantly extraordinary.

Next to me, Flint chuckles a little, and I want to ask him what's so funny when I notice Jaxon heading straight toward us, with an icy blankness in his eyes that makes a shiver run straight through me. But I can't get the words out, can't get anything out of a throat that has closed up tight.

I take a strangled breath, hoping it will chill me out a little. It doesn't work, but then I never really thought it would.

Not when all I can see is how he looked last night, sucking my blood off his thumb.

Not when all I can hear is his voice—low, wicked, wild—warning me to lock my door.

Not when all I can think about is kissing that mouth, running my tongue along the perfect bow of his upper lip, dragging his lower lip between my teeth and biting down just a little bit.

I don't know where the thoughts are coming from—this isn't like me. I've never thought about a guy like this before, not even my old boyfriend from back home. Even before we went out, I never stood around imagining what it would be like to kiss him.

To wrap my arms around him.

To press my body tightly against his.

Because I can almost feel him—almost taste him. I try to make myself think of anything else. Snow. Tomorrow's classes. My uncle, who is supposed to be here but is currently MIA.

None of it works, because all I can see is *him*.

My skin heats up under his gaze, my cheeks burning with embarrassment at the thoughts hitting through my head. And at the way he's looking at me, like he can read every single one of them.

It's impossible; I know it is. But the idea terrifies me enough that I jerk my gaze from his and lift my Dr Pepper to my mouth, trying hard to look unconcerned.

All of which leads to the carbonated drink going straight down the wrong pipe.

My abused lungs revolt as I cover my mouth and cough hard, eyes watering and humiliation burning in my belly. I pretend he isn't watching, pretend Flint isn't pounding on my back, pretend that I don't even notice the weight of all those cold stares as my new classmates watch me trying to suck air into lungs that just won't cooperate.

I need to get away from Flint's overzealous help, from Jaxon's threatening, all-encompassing gaze. At least if I find the nearest restroom, I can die in peace.

I start to move—I think I saw a bathroom marked in the hallway a couple of doors down—but I've taken only a few steps when Jaxon's suddenly right next to me. He doesn't acknowledge me, doesn't even look at me as he passes, but just like at the top of the stairs yesterday, our shoulders brush as he walks by.

My choking fit disappears as quickly as it started. Fresh air floods my lungs.

If I didn't know it was impossible, I would think he had something to do with it. Not just the choking but the stopping of it, as well.

But he didn't. Of course he didn't. The whole idea is absurd.

Knowing that doesn't keep me from turning around and watching him walk away, even though it's the worst thing I can do—for my sanity and my reputation—if the snark and giggles behind me are any indication.

He doesn't look back. In fact, he doesn't look at anyone as he walks along the edges of the buffet table, surveying its bounty. Doesn't so much as glance up as he eventually swipes one large,

perfect strawberry from a bowl.

I expect him to pop it in his mouth then and there, but he doesn't.

Instead, he walks to the center of the room—and the huge red velvet wingback chair positioned under the chandelier like a throne, with several other chairs in a half circle in front of it. Once there, he slouches down into the chair, legs spread out in front of him as he says something to the ve guys—all dark, all gorgeous, all stunning—sitting in the other chairs.

It's the first time I realize there's anyone in those chairs.

By now, nearly everyone in the room is watching Jaxon, trying to catch his eye. But he ignores them all, deliberately studying the strawberry he is pinching between his thumb and index finger.

Eventually he lifts his gaze and looks straight at me. Then he raises the strawberry to his lips—and bites it clean in half.

It's a warning if I've ever seen one—and a violent one at that—as a drop of red juice hangs for a second on his bottom lip.

I know I should stay, know I should face him down. But as his tongue darts out and licks up the strawberry juice in a very obvious *screw you* to Flint and me and everyone else in the room, I do the only thing I can.

I turn to Flint and blurt out, "I'm sorry. I have to go."

And then I head for the doors in as close to a run as I can manage without looking even more pathetic, desperate to get away before I shatter beneath the weight of Jaxon's obvious contempt.

Because one thing is certain—that little show was meant to underscore just how insignificant I really am to every single person in that room. I just wish I knew why...

11

In the Library, No One Can Hear You Scream

Once I get outside the room, I start to run, desperate to put as much space between Jaxon and myself as I can manage. I have no idea where I'm running, and I don't think it would matter even if I did. Not when I don't have a clue where anything is in this place.

I take a left at the end of the hallway, operating on pure instinct. On my complete desperation to be anywhere but at that party.

I have no idea what I did to make Jaxon so mad, have no idea why he blows so hot and cold with me. I've run into him four times since I got to this frozen hellhole, and each time has been a different experience. Douche the first time, blank the second, intense the third, and furious the fourth. His moods change more quickly than my bestie's Insta feed.

I get to another dead end, and this time I take a right. Seconds later, I come upon a staircase, this one as plain and un-fantastic as the main one is grand and ornate. I race down one flight and then another and another to the second floor. Once there, I take another right and don't stop until I run out of hallway.

I'm also out of breath and a little queasy, thanks to the

altitude sickness that I just can't seem to shake. I stop a minute and let myself breathe. As I do, the embarrassment nally recedes enough that my rational mind can take over.

Suddenly, I feel like a total moron for freaking out and an even bigger one for running away from Jaxon, who performed the very scary act of biting into a strawberry while looking at me.

Deep inside, I know it's more than that. It's the look on his face, the indolence of his body language, the very obvious *fuck you* in his eyes as he stared directly at me. But still, eeing the way I did seems absurd now.

Not absurd enough to make me go back to that ridiculously uncomfortable party, but more than absurd enough to make me embarrassed by my actions.

As I straighten and try to gure out what I'm going to do—heading back to my dorm room for more Advil and then some sleep is pretty much top of the list—I realize I'm standing in front of the school's library. And since I've never met a library I didn't like, I can't resist opening the door and walking inside.

The moment I do, I get hit with the oddest feeling. Dread pools in my stomach, and everything inside tells me to turn around, to go back the way I came. It's the strangest feeling I've ever had in my life, and for a second I think about giving in to it. But I've already done more than enough running for the day, so I ignore the pressure in my lungs and the uneasy churning in my stomach and keep walking forward until I'm standing in front of the checkout desk.

Once there, I take a few minutes to just stand and look around the library. It only takes a second for the feeling of dread to dissipate and for absolute wonder to take its place. Because whoever runs this library is my kind of people. Part of it is the sheer number of books—tens of thousands of them at least, lined up in bookcase after bookcase. But there are other things, too.

Gargoyles perched on random bookshelves, looking down as if guarding the books.

A few dozen shimmering crystals, interspersed with sparkling ribbons, hanging from the ceiling in what appears to be randomly spaced intervals.

All the room's open spaces have been turned into study alcoves, filled with beanbags and overstuffed chairs and even a few well-worn leather couches where there's room for them.

But the pièce de résistance, the thing that has me dying to meet the librarian, is the stickers plastered everywhere. On the walls, on the bookshelves, on the desks and chairs and computers. Everywhere. Big stickers, little stickers, funny stickers, encouraging stickers, brand-name stickers, emoji stickers, sarcastic stickers... The list goes on and on, and there's a part of me that wants to wander the library until I read or look at every single one.

But there are too many for one tour—too many for a dozen tours, if I'm honest—so I decide to start this one by checking out the stickers I run across when following the gargoyles.

Because after seeing the rest of the library, I don't believe for one second that the statues are randomly placed. Which means I desperately want to know what the librarian wants to show me.

The first gargoyle—a fierce-looking thing with bat wings and a furious snarl—stands guard over a shelf of horror novels. The bookshelf itself is decorated with Ghostbusters stickers, and I can't help but laugh as I trace the spines of everyone from John Webster to Mary Shelley, from Edgar Allan Poe to Joe Hill. The fact that there's a special homage to Victor Hugo only makes it better, especially the tongue-in-cheek placement of three copies of *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* right in the gargoyle's line of sight.

The second gargoyle—a squat fellow resting on his haunches

on a pile of skulls—presides over a bookcase filled with textbooks on human anatomy.

The fantasy bookshelf, complete with beautifully covered books about dragons and witches, is home to the third gargoyle statue, who has really fantastical wings and big claws curling around the miniature book she's reading. Unlike the others, both of whom look ferocious, this girl looks mischievous, like she knows she's going to get in trouble for being up way past her bedtime, but she just can't put the story down.

I decide instantly that she's my favorite and pick out a book from her shelf to read tonight in case I can't sleep. Then nearly laugh out loud as I trace my finger around the edges of a sticker that reads, "I'm not a damsel in distress; I'm a dragon in a dress."

I continue wandering from statue to statue, from a small shelf on Gothic architecture to a whole bookcase devoted to ghost stories. On and on it goes, and the longer I'm in here, the more convinced I am that the head librarian here is the coolest person ever—and has fantastic taste in books.

I make it to the end of the trail and turn the corner around the last bookshelf in search of the final gargoyle, only to find him pointing straight toward a half-open door. There's a huge sign on it that reads students must have permission to access this room, and—of course—that only makes me more curious. Especially since the light is on and there's some weird kind of music playing.

I try to place it, but as I get closer, I realize it's not so much music as it is chanting in a language I don't recognize and certainly can't understand. Instantly, my curiosity turns to excitement.

When I was researching Alaska, I learned that there are twenty different languages spoken here by the state's native peoples, and I can't help but wonder if that's what I'm hearing. I hope so—I've totally been wanting a chance to listen to one of the native lan-

guages spoken. Especially since so many of them are threatened, including a couple that have less than four thousand speakers in the entire world. That these native languages are dying out is one of the saddest things I've ever heard.

Maybe if I'm lucky, I can kill two birds with one stone here. I can meet the very cool librarian responsible for this library *and* get a lesson from her (because the voice is definitely female) on one of the native languages. Even one of those options makes for a much better night than standing around being stared at at a party that was supposedly thrown to welcome me.

But when I step up to the door, ready to introduce myself, I find that the person doing the chanting isn't the librarian at all. She's a girl about my age, with long, silky dark hair and one of the most beautiful faces I've ever seen. Maybe *the* most beautiful.

She's holding open a book and reading from it, which explains the chanting I heard. I want to ask what language it is, since I can't see the cover, but the way her head snaps up when I step over the threshold has the words drying up in my throat.

Whoever she is, she looks fierce, cheeks flushed, and mouth open wide to let out the unique sounds of whatever language she is speaking. She stops mid-word, with what looks an awful lot like fury burning in her swirling black eyes.

It's All
Fun and Games
Until Someone Loses
Their Life

I fumble for an apology—or at least an excuse—but before I can come up with one, the rage in her eyes is gone. In fact, it dissipates so quickly, I can't be sure I didn't imagine it. Especially since the anger, or whatever it was, turns to welcome as she walks toward me.

"You must be Grace," she says in slightly accented English as she comes to a stop about a foot in front of me. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." She extends a hand forward and I take it, bemused, as she continues. "I'm Lia, and I have a feeling we're going to be really good friends."

It's not the strangest greeting I've ever gotten—that honor still belongs to Brant Hayward, whose version of *nice to meet you* was wiping his boogers all over my first-day-of-school dress when we were both in kindergarten—but it's a close second. Still, there's an infectiousness about her smile that has me grinning back.

"I *am* Grace," I agree. "It's nice to meet you."

"Oh, don't be so formal," she tells me, gently steering me out of the room before I can mention that I want to look around. Seconds later, she's got the lights off and the door closed behind

us, all in the most efficient way possible.

“What language was that you were speaking? Was it native to Alaska? It was beautiful,” I say as we start walking back toward the center of the library.

“Oh, no.” She laughs, a light, tinkling sound that perfectly matches the rest of her. “It’s actually a language I came across in my research. I’ve never heard it spoken out loud, so I’m not even sure I’m pronouncing it correctly.”

“Well, it sounded amazing. What kind of book was it in?” Now I wish more than ever that I’d gotten a look at the cover.

“A boring one,” she answers with a wave of her hand. “I swear this research project is going to kill me. Now, come on, let’s go get some tea, and you can tell me all about yourself. Plenty of time to talk about classes when you’re actually stuck *in* them.”

I decide not to mention that starting new classes is pretty much the only thing I’ve been looking forward to about the move to Alaska. I mean, my public school definitely didn’t offer Witch Hunts in the Atlantic World for a history credit. Besides, tea sounds wonderful, especially considering what just happened when I tried a Dr Pepper. So does the idea of making a friend at this place where everyone looks at me like I have three heads... or like I’m nothing at all.

“Are you sure you aren’t busy? I didn’t mean to interrupt. I just wanted to explore the library a little bit. I love the gargoyle theme. Very Gothic.”

“It is, right? Ms. Royce is cool like that.”

“Oh, yeah? Let me guess. Flannel shirts and a hipster vibe? That kind of thing?”

“You would think. But she’s actually more a *hippie skirt and flower crown* kind of woman.”

“Now I want to meet her even more.” We’re on the other side of the library from where I came in and we pass through a

sitting area with a bunch of black couches, each one dotted with purple throw pillows bearing different quotes from classic horror movies. My favorite is Norman Bates's famous line from *Psycho*: "We all go a little mad sometimes." Although I'm also partial to the pillow next to it: "Be afraid. Be very afraid," from *The Fly*.

"Ms. Royce is big on Halloween," Lia says with a laugh. "I don't think she's put everything away yet."

Oh, right. Halloween wasn't that long ago. I've been so focused on everything else that I just about forgot about it completely this year, even though Heather spent months making her costume from scratch.

I put the book I picked up earlier down on the nearest table—I'll come back for it when the librarian is here— Lia pushes the main door open and gestures for me to precede her. I wait while she turns off the lights, then locks the door. "The library is usually closed on Sunday nights, but I'm doing an independent study this semester, so Ms. Royce lets me work late sometimes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize—"

"No need to apologize, Grace." She shoots me a vaguely exasperated look. "How were you supposed to know? I'm just telling you why I have to lock things back up."

"Good point," I admit, a little surprised at how nice she's being.

She starts down the hallway. "So I'm assuming, since you aren't at the party Macy organized for you, that your first full day at our illustrious school hasn't been as smooth as your cousin hoped it'd be?"

She's got that right, but I'm not going to admit it when that would sound like I'm throwing Macy under the bus. Especially since Macy isn't the problem. Everything else is, but not her. "The party was good. I've just had a really long day. I needed a break for a few minutes."

“I bet. Unless you’re coming from Vancouver or something, getting here is never easy.”

“Yeah, I’m definitely not from Vancouver.” I shiver a little as an unexpected wind whips through the hallway.

I glance around, looking for where it could be coming from, then get distracted as Lia raises her brows and says, “Alaska is a long way from California.”

“How did you know I’m from California?” Maybe that’s why everyone is staring at me—I must be wearing my not-from-here vibe like a parka.

“Foster must have mentioned it when he let us know you were coming,” she answers. “And I’ve got to say, San Diego is pretty much the worst possible place to move here from.”

“It’s the worst possible place to move anywhere from,” I agree. “But especially here.”

“No doubt.” She looks me up and down, then smirks. “So are you freezing in that dress?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been freezing since I landed in Fairbanks. Doesn’t matter what I wear—even before Macy talked me into putting on this thing.”

“Guess we better get you that tea, then.” She nods to the staircase that’s just come into view. “My room’s on the fourth floor, if that’s okay?”

“Oh, ours is, too. Mine and Macy’s, I mean.”

“Awesome.”

Lia keeps talking as we make our way to the stairs, pointing out different rooms she thinks I need to know—the chem lab, the study lounge, the snack shop. Part of me wants to pull out my phone and take notes—or, better yet, draw a map, since I’m hopeless with directions. Maybe if I can figure out something as simple as the layout of the castle, other things will fall into place, too. And then I can start to feel safe again—something I

haven't felt in a really long time.

We finally make it back to Lia's room—she's in what I'm assuming is the West hallway, judging by its location in relation to mine. I'm a little surprised when she stops in front of the one door on the hallway, maybe on the whole floor, that doesn't have some kind of decoration on it.

My surprise must show, because she says, "It's been a rough year. I just wasn't up to decorating when I got back here."

"That sucks. The rough-year part, I mean. Not the decorating part."

"I knew what you meant." She smiles sadly. "My boyfriend died several months ago, and everyone thinks I should be over it. But we were together a really long time. It's not that easy to just let him go. As I'm sure you know."

It's been a month since my parents died, and I still feel like I'm in shock half the time. "No, it's not."

Like I wake up every morning and for a minute, just a minute, I don't remember why I have that sinking feeling in my stomach.

I don't remember that they're gone and I'm never going to see them again.

I don't remember that I'm alone.

And then it hits me all over again, and so does the grief.

Getting on that first plane yesterday morning was the hardest thing I've ever done—besides identifying them—and I think it's because it made their deaths sink in just a little more.

Lia and I just kind of stand there in the middle of her dorm room for a second, two people who look fine on the outside but who are destroyed on the inside. We don't talk, don't say anything at all. Just stay where we are and absorb the fact that someone else hurts as much as we do.

It's a bizarre feeling. And an oddly comforting one.

Eventually, Lia moves over to her desk, where she has an

electric kettle plugged in. She pours some water into it from the pitcher she also has on her desk, then turns it on before opening a jar of what looks like potpourri and scooping it into two tea strainers.

“Can I help with anything?” I ask, even though she seems to have things under control. It’s nice to see her go through the ritual of making tea from homemade leaves. It reminds me of my mom and all the hours we spent in the kitchen assembling all her different blends.

“I’ve got it.” She nods to the second bed in the room, which she has set up as a kind of couch/daybed thing with a red comforter and a bunch of jewel-toned throw pillows. “Go ahead and sit down.”

I do, wishing I was in yoga pants or joggers instead of this dress so I could sit like a normal person. Lia doesn’t talk much as she makes the tea, and I don’t, either. Kind of hard to know where to take the conversation now that we’ve covered everything from dying languages to dead loved ones.

The silence drags on, and I start to feel uncomfortable. But it doesn’t take long for the teakettle to boil, thankfully, and then Lia’s setting a cup of tea down in front of me. “It’s my own special blend,” she says, holding her cup up to her mouth and blowing softly. “I hope you like it.”

“I’m sure it’s awesome.” I wrap my hands around my cup and nearly shudder with relief at finally being able to warm up my fingers. Even if it tastes terrible, it’s worth it to have a chance at not being cold.

“These cups are beautiful,” I tell her after taking a sip. “Are they Japanese?”

“Yes,” Lia says with a smile. “From my favorite shop back home in Tokyo. My mom sends me a new set every semester. It helps with the homesickness.”

“That’s awesome.” I think of my own mom and the way she always bought me a new tea mug every Christmas. Looks like Lia and I really do have a lot in common.

“So how did the party go? I assume not well, considering you ended up in the library, but did you at least get to meet some people?”

“I did, yeah. They seemed nice enough.”

She laughs. “You’re a really bad liar.”

“Yeah, well, it seemed polite to try.” I take a sip of the tea, which has a really powerful oral taste that I’m not sure I care for. But it’s hot, and that’s enough to have me taking another sip. “I’ve been told that before, though. The bad-liar part, I mean.”

“You should probably work on that. At Katmere, knowing how to lie well is practically Survival 101.”

It’s my turn to laugh. “I guess I’m in serious trouble, then.”

“I guess you are.” There’s no humor in her answer this time, and I realize suddenly that there was none in her original statement, either.

“Wait,” I say, strangely discomfited by that fact. “What do you guys have to lie about that’s so important?”

That’s when Lia looks me straight in the eye and answers, “Everything.”

13

Just Bite Me

I have no idea how to respond to that. I mean, what am I supposed to say? What am I supposed to think?

“Don’t look so scandalized,” she tells me after a few seconds of awkward silence. “I’m just teasing, Grace.”

“Oh, right.” I laugh along with her, because what else can I do? Still, it doesn’t feel right. Maybe because of how serious she looked when she told me that she lies about everything. Or maybe because I can’t help wondering if that was the truth and these are just lies... Either way, there’s not much else for me to do but shrug and say, “I figured you were just messing with me.”

“I totally was. You should have seen your face.”

“I bet,” I answer with a laugh.

She doesn’t say anything for a few seconds and neither do I, until the silence starts to feel awkward. In self- defense, I finally blurt out, “What language were you reading earlier? It sounded so cool.”

Lia looks at me for a second, like she’s debating if she wants to answer or not. Finally, she answers, “Akkadian. It’s the language that evolved from ancient Sumerian.”

“Really? So it’s three thousand years old?”

She looks surprised. “Something like that, yeah.”

“That’s incredible. I’ve always been so impressed with linguists and anthropologists who do that, you know? Like it’s one thing to figure out what the different letters mean and the words they make.” I shake my head in awe. “But to figure out what they sound like? It kind of blows my mind.”

“Right?” Her eyes glow with excitement. “The foundation of language is so—”

My phone vibrates with several text messages in a row, cutting her off. I pull it out, figuring Macy finally got tired of waiting for me to come back. Sure enough, my home screen is a series of texts from my cousin, each one a little more frantic than the one before it. Looks like she’s been texting me for a while but I had my ringer off.

Macy: Hey, where’d you go?

Macy: I keep waiting for you to come back

Macy: Hey, where are you????

Macy: I’m coming to find you

Macy: Are you okay????

Macy: Answer me!!!!

Macy: What’s going on?

Macy: Are. You. OK?????

I text her back a quick, *I’m good*, and my phone immediately buzzes again. A glance at my cousin’s all-caps *WHERE ARE YOU?* and I know I’d better find her before she loses it completely.

“Sorry, Lia, but I’ve got to go. Macy’s freaking out.”

“Why? Because you left the party? She’ll get over it.”

“Yeah, but I think she’s actually worried.” I don’t tell her about what happened with those guys last night, don’t mention that that’s probably why Macy is so upset that she can’t find me. Instead, I focus on my phone and text back *Lia’s room* before standing up. “Thanks for the tea.”

“At least stay a couple more minutes, finish your drink.” She looks half amused, half disappointed as she continues. “You don’t want your cousin to think she can boss you around.”

I carry my cup over to the bathroom sink. “She’s not bossing me around. I think she’s afraid I’m upset or something.” It seems easier to give that explanation than to go into everything that happened with Marc and Quinn. “Besides, if I know her, she’s on her way to your room right now.”

“You’re probably right. Macy does tend to be the hysterical type.”

“I didn’t say that—” A knock on the door cuts me off.

Lia just grins at me in an *I told you so* kind of way. “Don’t worry about washing the cup,” she says, taking it from my hands. “Just go show Macy that you’re not crying your eyes out. And that I didn’t murder you.”

“She wouldn’t think that. She’s just worried about me.” Still, I make a beeline for the door, then throw it open to reveal my cousin—as predicted—on the other side. “I’m right here,” I tell her with a smile.

“Oh, thank God!” She throws her arms around me. “I thought something had happened to you.”

“What could possibly happen to me when nearly everyone else is at the party? I just went for a walk,” I try to joke.

“I don’t know.” She looks suddenly uncertain. “Lots of things...”

“I think Macy was worried you might have gone outside,” Lia interjects. “If you had wandered out in that dress, you’d be close to dead by now.”

“Yes, exactly!” Macy looks like she’s seized on the excuse. “I didn’t want you to freeze to death before your first full day in Alaska is over.” It’s a strange answer, especially considering she knows what almost happened to me last night and that I was

terrified of being thrown outside for just that reason. But now isn't exactly the time to get into all that, so I turn to Lia instead. And say, "Thanks for everything."

"No worries." She grins at me. "Stop by again sometime. We'll do mani-pedis or facials or something."

"Sounds good. And I'd love to hear more about your research."

"Mani-pedis?" Macy repeats, sounding surprised. "Research?"

Lia rolls her eyes. "Obviously, you're invited, too." And then she closes the door in our faces.

Which...let's be honest, seems weird, considering how friendly she's been all night. Then again, the second Macy showed up, everything about Lia got a lot sharper. Maybe her abrupt good night has more to do with my cousin than it does with me.

And then Macy whispers, "I can't believe you got invited to do mani-pedis with Lia Tanaka. *After* being invited to her room."

She doesn't sound jealous, just confused. Like it's the strangest thing in the world for Lia and me to have something in common. "It wasn't hard. She seems really nice."

"'Nice' isn't the adjective I would normally use to describe her," Macy answers as we start down the hall. "She's the most popular girl in school and normally takes great pains to remind people of that. Although lately, she's been really reclusive."

"Yeah, well, after losing her boyfriend, I figure she's entitled."

Macy's eyes go huge. "She *told* you about that?"

"Yeah." A sickening thought occurs to me. "Is it a secret?"

"No. It's just... I've heard she doesn't talk about Hudson." Her voice is off when she says it, and suddenly she's looking anywhere but at me. I'm pretty sure it's because she's uncomfortable and not because the thousand-year-old tapestry she's currently looking at and has probably seen a million times is more interesting than

our conversation. I just wish I knew why.

“That’s not that surprising, is it?” I answer. “And she didn’t really talk about him to me. Just told me that he died.”

“Yeah. Almost a year ago. It kind of rattled the school.” She’s still not looking at me, which is growing weirder by the second.

“Was he a student here?”

“He was, but he graduated the year before he died. Still, it really freaked a lot of us out.”

“I bet.” I want to ask what happened, but she’s so uncomfortable that it seems rude, so I let it go.

We walk in silence for a couple of minutes, giving the subject time to dissipate. Once it does, Macy bounces back to her normal self and asks, “Are you hungry? You didn’t eat anything at the party.”

I start to say yes—I haven’t eaten since the bowl of Frosted Flakes Macy poured me this morning from her stash—but the altitude sickness must be back, because the mention of food has my stomach rumbling, and not in a good way. “You know, I think I’m just going to go to bed. I’m not feeling so great.”

For the first time, Macy looks worried. “If you aren’t feeling better in the morning, I think we’d better stop by the nurse. You’ve been here more than twenty-four hours now. You should be starting to get used to the altitude.”

“When I googled it, it said twenty-four to forty-eight hours. If I’m not better after tomorrow’s classes, I’ll go. Okay?”

“If you’re not better after tomorrow’s classes, I’m pretty sure my dad will drag you there himself. He’s been frantic about you since you asked him to leave you in San Diego to finish up your semester.”

Another awkward silence starts to descend, and honestly, I just can’t take it right now. So it’s my turn to change the subject when I say, “I can’t believe how tired I am. What time is it anyway?”

Macy laughs. “It’s eight o’clock, party animal.”

“I’ll party next week. After I nally get some sleep...and after this gross altitude sickness goes away.” I put a hand to my stomach as the nausea from earlier returns with a vengeance.

“I’m such a jerk.” Macy rolls her eyes at herself. “Planning a party on your rst couple of days here was a bad move on my part. I’m so sorry.”

“You’re not a jerk. You were just trying to help me meet people.”

“I was *trying* to show off my fabulous older cousin—”

“I’m older by, like, a year.”

“Older is older, isn’t it?” She grins at me. “Anyway, I was trying to show you off and help you get acclimated. I didn’t think about the fact that you might need a day or two to just breathe.”

We make it to our room, and Macy unlocks the door with a flourish. Just in time, too, because my stomach revolts about two seconds after I walk in the door. I barely make it to the bathroom before I throw up a noxious combination of tea and Dr Pepper.

Looks like Alaska really is trying to kill me after all.

14

Knock, Knock, Knocking on Death's Door

I spend the next fifteen minutes trying to throw up the inside of my stomach and hoping that if this godforsaken place *is* trying to kill me, it just gets it over with already.

When the nausea finally stops about half an hour later, I'm exhausted and the headache is back in full force.

"Should I get the nurse?" Macy asks, walking behind me, arms outstretched to catch me as I make my way to the bed. "I think I should get the nurse."

I groan as I climb under my cool sheets. "Let's give it a little while longer."

"I don't think—"

"Older-cousin prerogative." I shoot her a grin I'm far from feeling and snuggle onto my pillow. "If I'm not better in the morning, we'll call the nurse."

"Are you sure?" Macy dances from foot to foot as though unsure what to do.

"Considering I've had more than enough attention since I got to this school? Yes. Definitely."

She doesn't look happy by my refusal, but eventually she nods.

I drift in and out of sleep as my cousin washes her face and changes into her pajamas. But right around the time she turns off the light and crawls into bed, another wave of nausea rolls over me. I ride it out, trying to ignore how much I wish my mom were here to baby me a little, and eventually fall into a tful sleep, one I don't wake from until an alarm blares at six thirty the next morning. It goes off just as abruptly as someone hits Snooze.

I wake up disoriented, trying to remember where I am and whose godawful alarm was beeping in my ear. Then it all comes flooding back. After one additional trip to the bathroom around three to dry heave my guts up, the nausea receded, which was a giant plus. And everything else feels okay now—my head has stopped spinning, and while my throat feels dry, it doesn't hurt, either.

Huh. Looks like the internet was right about the whole *twenty-four to forty-eight hours to acclimate* thing. I'm good as new.

At least until I sit up and realize the rest of my body is another story. Nearly every muscle I have aches like I've just climbed Denali—after running a marathon. I'm pretty sure it's just dehydration combined with how tense I was yesterday, but either way, I'm in no mood to get up. I'm certainly in no mood to put on a happy face for my first day of classes.

I lie back down and pull the covers over my head, trying to decide what I want to do. I'm still lying there ten minutes later when Macy wakes up with a grumble.

The first thing she does is slap at her alarm until it stops again—something I am eternally grateful for, considering she picked the most grating, annoying sound ever created to wake up to—but it takes her only a second to climb out of bed and come over to me.

“Grace?” she whispers softly, like she wants to check on me

but doesn't want to wake me up at the same time.

"I'm okay," I tell her. "Just sore."

"Yuck. That's probably dehydration." She crosses to the fridge in the corner of the room and pulls out a pitcher of water. She pours two glasses and then hands me one as she settles back onto her bed. She spends a minute texting—Cam, I figure—before tossing her phone aside and looking at me. "I have to go to my classes today—I've got tests in three of them—but I'll come back and check on you when I can."

I'm pretty much loving her assumption that I'm not going to class, so I don't argue. Except to say, "You don't have to go out of your way to check on me. I'm feeling much better."

"Good, then you can consider this a mental health day, of the *Holy crap, I just moved to Alaska!* variety."

"There's an actual mental health day for that?" I tease, moving around until I'm sitting up with my back against the wall.

Macy snorts. "There are whole mental health *months* for that. Alaska's not easy."

It's my turn to snort. "No kidding. I've been here less than forty-eight hours and I've already figured that out."

"That's just because you're afraid of wolves," she teases.

"And bears," I admit without a flicker of embarrassment. "As any sane person should be."

"You have a point." She grins. "You should take the day and do whatever you want. Read a book, watch some trash TV, eat my stash of junk food if your stomach feels up to it. Dad will let your teachers know you'll be starting tomorrow instead of today."

I hadn't even thought of Uncle Finn. "Will your dad be okay with me skipping class?"

"He's the one who suggested it."

"How does he know—?" I break off when a knock sounds at the door. "Who—?"

“My dad,” Macy says as she crosses the room and throws open the door with a flourish. “Who else?”

Except it’s not Uncle Finn at all. It’s Flint, who takes one look at Macy in her tiny nightshirt and me in last night’s dress and smeared makeup and starts grinning like a dork.

“Looking good, ladies.” He gives a low whistle. “Guess you decided to take the tea party up a notch or four last night, huh?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Macy taunts as she makes a beeline for the bathroom and the privacy it affords. I don’t bother to answer, just stick my tongue out at him. He laughs and raises his eyebrows in response.

“I *would* like to know,” Flint tells me as he crosses over to sit on the end of my bed. “Where’d you run off to? And why?”

Because telling him the whole reason involves trying to explain my bizarre reaction to Jaxon—not to mention everything that came after—I settle for part of the truth. “The altitude really started getting to me. I felt like I was going to throw up, so I came back to the room.”

That wipes the smile off his face. “How are you now? Altitude sickness isn’t anything to fool around with. Can you breathe okay?”

“I can breathe fine. I swear,” I add when he doesn’t look convinced. “I’m feeling almost normal today. Just had to get used to the mountains, I guess.”

“Speaking of mountains.” Flint’s appealing grin is back. “That’s why I came by. A bunch of us are having a snowball fight after dinner tonight. Thought you might want to join in... if you feel okay, I mean.”

“A snowball fight?” I shake my head. “I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t even know how to make a snowball, let alone how to throw one.”

He looks at me like I'm being silly. "You pick up snow, you pack it into a ball, and then you throw it at the nearest person." He uses his hands to mime his words. "It's not exactly hard."

I stare at him, unconvinced.

"Come on, New Girl. Give it a try. I promise it'll be fun."

"Careful, Grace." Macy comes out of the bathroom, her hair wrapped in a towel. "Never trust a..." She trails off when Flint turns to her, brows raised.

"They're having a snowball ght after class today," I tell her. "He wants us to join." He hadn't invited Macy in so many words, but there's no way I'm going without her. And from the sudden smile on her face, I'm guessing I made the right choice.

"Seriously? We have to go, Grace. Flint's snowball ghts are legendary around here."

"That doesn't exactly raise my confidence level, considering I have no idea what I'm doing."

"It'll be ne," they both say at the same time.

It's my turn to raise my brows as I look back and forth between them.

"Trust me," Flint implores. "I'll take good care of you."

"Don't trust him," Macy tells me. "Put a snowball in that boy's hand and he's utterly diabolical. But that doesn't mean it won't be fun."

I still think it's a bad idea, but Flint and Macy are my only two actual friends at Katmere. Who knows what will happen with Lia, and as for Jaxon... Jaxon is a lot of things, but I definitely wouldn't call him a friend. Or even friendly, for that matter.

"Okay, ne," I give in gracefully. "But if I end up dying in the middle of the ght, I'm going to haunt both of you forever."

"I'm pretty sure you'll survive," Macy assures me.

Flint, on the other hand, just winks. "And if not, I can think of worse ways to spend eternity."

Before I can come up with a response to that, he leans over and drops a kiss on my cheek. “See you later, New Girl.” And then he’s gone, slipping out the door without a backward glance.

I’m left with a wide-eyed, openmouthed Macy, who is all but clapping her hands in delight over one little peck. And the sad knowledge that no matter how adorable Flint is, he doesn’t make me feel anything close to what Jaxon does.

15

So Hell Actually *Can* Freeze Over

“**D**id he...” Macy gasps out after he shuts the door behind him.

“It’s not a big deal,” I assure her.

“Flint just...” Apparently the word is still failing her, because she taps her cheek in the same spot where Flint kissed mine.

“It’s *not* a big deal,” I say again. “It’s not like he planted one on me or anything. He was just being friendly.”

“He’s never been friendly like that to *me*. Or anyone else I’ve seen.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got a boyfriend. He’s probably afraid Cam will kick his ass.”

Macy laughs. She actually laughs, which...okay. The idea of her thin, lanky boyfriend kicking Flint’s ass does seem a little absurd. But still, shouldn’t she at least *pretend* to defend him?

“You want me to talk to him?” I tease. “See if he’ll kiss *you* next time?”

“Of course not! I’m very happy with Cam and his kisses, thank you. I’m just saying, Flint likes you.” She grabs a brush, starts running it through her hair.

Despite her words, there’s something in her tone that has me

narrowing my eyes. “Wait. Do you have a crush on Flint *for real*?”

“Of course I don’t. I love Cam.” She avoids looking me in the eye as she grabs some product.

“Yeah, because that’s real convincing.” I roll my eyes. “Look, if you want to be with Flint, shouldn’t you just break up with Cam and go for it?”

“I *don’t* want to be with Flint.”

“Mace—”

“I’m serious, Grace. Maybe I used to have a crush on him, way back in ninth grade or something. But that was a long time ago, and it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Because of Cam.” I watch her face closely in the mirror as she starts to style her short, colorful hair.

“Because I love Cam, yes,” she says as she spikes up a few strands. “And also because it’s not like that here.”

“Not like what?”

“The different groups. They don’t mix much.”

“Yeah, I noticed that at the party. But just because they *don’t* doesn’t mean they *can’t*, right? I mean, if you like Flint and he likes you—”

“I don’t like Flint,” she groans. “And he definitely doesn’t like me. And if I did like him, it wouldn’t matter anyway, because...”

“Because what? He’s popular?”

She sighs, shakes her head. “It’s more than that.”

“More than *what*? I’m beginning to feel like I’ve fallen into *Mean Girls*, Alaska version or something.”

A knock sounds on the door before she can answer.

“Exactly how many people stop by your room before seven thirty in the morning anyway?” I joke as I cross to the door. Macy doesn’t answer, just kind of shrugs and grins as she starts on her makeup.

I pull open the door to find my uncle looking down at me

worriedly. “How are you feeling? Macy said you were throwing up last night.”

“I’m better, Uncle Finn. The nausea’s gone and so is the headache.”

“You’re sure?” He gestures for me to climb back into my bed, so I do—a little gratefully, if I’m being honest. I’ve gotten so little sleep the last two nights that I feel like I’m in a fog, even if the altitude sickness has nally gone away.

“Good.” He puts a hand on my forehead, like he’s testing if I have a fever.

I start to crack a joke about altitude sickness not being a virus, but as he follows the hand on my forehead with a kiss to the top of my head, I get choked up. Because right now, with his eyebrows furrowed and his mouth curled into a frown that only makes his dimples more apparent, Uncle Finn looks so much like my dad that it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to cry.

“I still think Macy’s right,” he continues, oblivious to how broken I suddenly feel. “You should spend the day resting and start class tomorrow. Losing your parents, the move, Katmere Academy, Alaska—it’s a lot to get used to, even without altitude sickness.”

I nod but look away before he can see the emotion in my eyes.

He must recognize my struggle, because he doesn’t say anything else. Just pats my hand before wandering back to the built-in vanity where Macy is still getting ready.

They talk, but they keep their voices so low that I can’t hear anything, so I just tune it all out. I crawl back into bed, pull my covers up to my chin. And wait for the pain of missing my parents to pass.

I don’t plan to fall asleep, but I do anyway. The next time I wake up, it’s after one, and my stomach is grumbling pretty much nonstop. This time, though, the discomfort is because it’s

been more than twenty-four hours since I've put anything that even resembles food into it.

There's a jar of peanut butter and a box of crackers on top of the fridge, and I glom onto both of them. A ton of peanut butter and an entire sleeve of crackers later and I nally feel human again.

I also feel trapped—inside this room and inside the school.

I try to ignore the restlessness, try to watch one of my favorite shows on Net ix or read the magazine I didn't nish on the plane. I even text Heather, though I know she's at school, hoping she can message back and forth with me for a while. Except—according to the one text she does manage to send back—she's about to take a calculus test, so definitely no distraction there.

Nothing else I try sticks, either, so nally I decide to just go for it. Maybe a walk around the Alaskan wilderness is exactly what I need to clear my head.

But deciding to go for a walk and actually getting ready for one are two very different things up here. I take a quick shower and then—because I'm a total newbie—I google how to dress for an Alaskan winter. Turns out the answer is *very* carefully, even when it's only November.

Once I pull up a site that looks reputable, the clothes Macy made sure I have make a lot more sense. I start with the wool tights she got me and one of my tank tops, then add a layer of long underwear—pants and shirt. After the underwear, I slip into eece pants in hot pink (of course) and a eece jacket in gray. The site gives me the option of another, heavier jacket to go over this one, but it's nowhere near as cold as it's going to get in a couple of months, so I decide to skip it and go straight for the hat, scarf, gloves, and two pairs of socks. Finally, I nish with the down-lled hooded parka my uncle got me and the pair of snow boots rated for Denali that are at the bottom of my closet.

A quick look in the mirror tells me I look as ridiculous as I feel.

But I figure I'll look even more ridiculous if I freeze to death on my second full day in Alaska, so I ignore the feeling. Besides, if I end up getting really warm during my walk, I can take off the fleece layer—or so the online guide suggests, as sweat is the enemy up here. Apparently walking around in wet clothes can lead to hypothermia. So...just like everything else in this state.

Instead of texting her and interrupting one of her tests, I leave Macy a note telling her I'm going to explore the school grounds—I'm not foolish enough to actually wander out past the wall into the wilderness, where there are wolves and bears and God only knows what else.

Then I head out. As I walk down the stairs, I ignore pretty much everyone I come across—which is almost nobody, since most of the school is in class right now. I should probably feel guilty that I'm not, but to be honest, I just feel relieved.

Once I'm on the ground floor, I take the first outside door I can find and then nearly change my mind as the wind and cold all but slap me in the face.

Maybe I should have put on that extra layer after all...

It's too late now, so I pull my hoodie up over my head and duck my scarf-covered face down into my parka's high collar. Then I set out across the yard, despite the fact that every instinct I have is screaming at me to go back inside.

But I've always heard you're supposed to start something how you plan to end it, and I am *not* going to be a prisoner inside the school for the next year. Over my dead freaking body.

I shove my hands in my pockets and begin to walk.

At first, I'm so miserable that all I can think about is the cold and how it feels against my skin, despite the fact that nearly every inch of me is covered in multiple layers.

But the more I walk, the warmer I become, so I up my pace and finally get the chance to start looking around. The sun rose about four hours ago—at nearly ten a.m.—so this is my first daylight look at the wilderness.

I'm struck by how beautiful everything is, even here on the campus grounds. We're on the side of a mountain, so everything is sloped, which means I'm constantly walking up or down one hill or another—not easy, considering the altitude, but at least I'm breathing a lot easier than I was two days ago.

There aren't a lot of different plants here right now, but there are a bunch of evergreens lining the various walkways and clustered at different points around campus. They're a beautiful green against the backdrop of white snow that covers nearly everything out here.

Curious what it feels like—but not ridiculous enough to take off my gloves—I bend down and scoop up a handful of snow, then let it slip through my fingers just to see how it falls. When my hand is empty, I bend down and scoop up some more, then do what Flint said earlier and pat it into a ball.

It's easier than I thought it would be, and it takes only a few seconds before I'm hurling the snow as hard as I can at the nearest tree on the left side of where the path forks ahead. I watch with satisfaction as it hits the trunk and explodes, before heading toward the path just beyond it.

But as I walk closer to the tree, I realize I've never seen anything like its dark, twisted roots. Huge and gray and gnarled together in a chaotic mess that looks like something out of a really bad nightmare, they all but scream for passersby to beware. Add in the broken branches and ripped-up bark off the trunk and the thing looks like it belongs in the middle of a horror movie instead of Katmere's otherwise pristine campus.

I'm not going to lie. It gives me pause. I know it's ridiculous

to be repulsed by a tree, but the closer I get to it, the worse it looks—and the worse I feel about the trail it’s guarding. Figuring I’ve already pushed my comfort zone enough for one day just being out here, I veer toward the sun-dappled path on the right instead.

Turns out, it’s a good choice, because as soon as I make my way around the first bend, I can see a bunch of buildings. I pause to look at most of them from a safe distance, since class is in session and the last thing I want is to be caught trying to peek in through the windows like some kind of weirdo.

Besides, each cottage—and they do look like cottages—has a sign in front of it that names the building and says what it’s used for.

I pause when I get to one of the larger ones. It’s labeled Chinook: Art, and my heart speeds up a little just looking at it. I’ve been sketching and painting since I understood crayons can do more than color in coloring books—and part of me wants nothing more than to run up the snow-lined path and throw open the door, just to see what kind of art studio they have out here that I can work in.

I settle for pulling out my phone and taking a quick pic of the sign. I’ll google the word “chinook” later. I know it means “wind” in at least one native Alaskan language, but it will be fun to figure out which one.

I kind of want to know what *all* the words mean, so as I continue walking past the different outlying buildings—some larger than others—I snap a picture of each sign so I can look up the words later. Plus, I figure it’ll help me remember where everything is, since I don’t have a clue what rooms my classes are in yet.

I’m actually a little concerned about having too many classes out here, because what am I supposed to do? Run back to my

room and get all these clothes on in between classes? If so, exactly how long are the passing periods here at Katmere? Because the six minutes I got at my old school isn't exactly going to cut it.

When I reach the end of the scattered row of buildings, I find a stone-lined trail that seems to wind its way around the grounds to the other side of the castle. A weird sense that I should turn around settles across my shoulders—kind of like what I felt at the library last night—and I pause for a second.

But I know when I'm letting my imagination get the better of me—that tree back there really spooked me—so I shake off the feeling and head down the trail.

But the farther I get from the main building, the worse the wind gets, and I pick up my pace to try to stay warm. So much for getting too hot and taking off a layer like that website suggested. Pretty sure the threat of turning into a Grace-avored Popsicle gets a little more real with every second that passes.

Still, I don't turn back. At this point, I think I've circled more than half the grounds, which means I'm closer to the main castle if I keep going forward instead of heading back the way I came. So I pull my scarf a little more tightly around my face, shove my hands deep into my coat pockets, and keep going.

I head by a few more clumps of trees, a pond that is completely frozen over that I would love to ice skate on if I can manage to balance with all these clothes on, and a couple more small buildings. One is labeled Shila: Shop and the other says Tanana: Dance Studio over the door.

The cottage names are cool, but the classes they house surprise me a little. I don't know what I expected of Katmere Academy, but I guess it wasn't that it would have everything a regular high school has and so much more.

Admittedly, my only knowledge of rich boarding schools comes from my mom's old DVD of *Dead Poets Society* she

made me watch with her once a year. But in that movie, Welton Academy was super strict, super harsh, and super stuck-up. So far, Katmere Academy seems to be only one of the three.

The wind is getting worse, so once again I pick up my pace, following the trail past a bunch of larger trees. These aren't evergreens, their leaves long gone and their branches coated in frost and dripping with icicles. I pause to study a few of them because they're beautiful, and because the light refracting through them sends rainbows dancing on the ground at my feet.

I'm charmed by this little bit of whimsy, so much that I don't even mind the wind for a second because it's what's making the rainbows dance. Eventually, though, I get too cold to stand still and make my way out of the trees to find another frozen pond. This one is obviously meant as a place people can hang out, because there are a bunch of seats around it, along with a snow-topped gazebo several yards away.

I take a couple of steps toward the gazebo, thinking I might sit down and rest for a minute, before I realize that it's already occupied by Lia—and *Jaxon*.